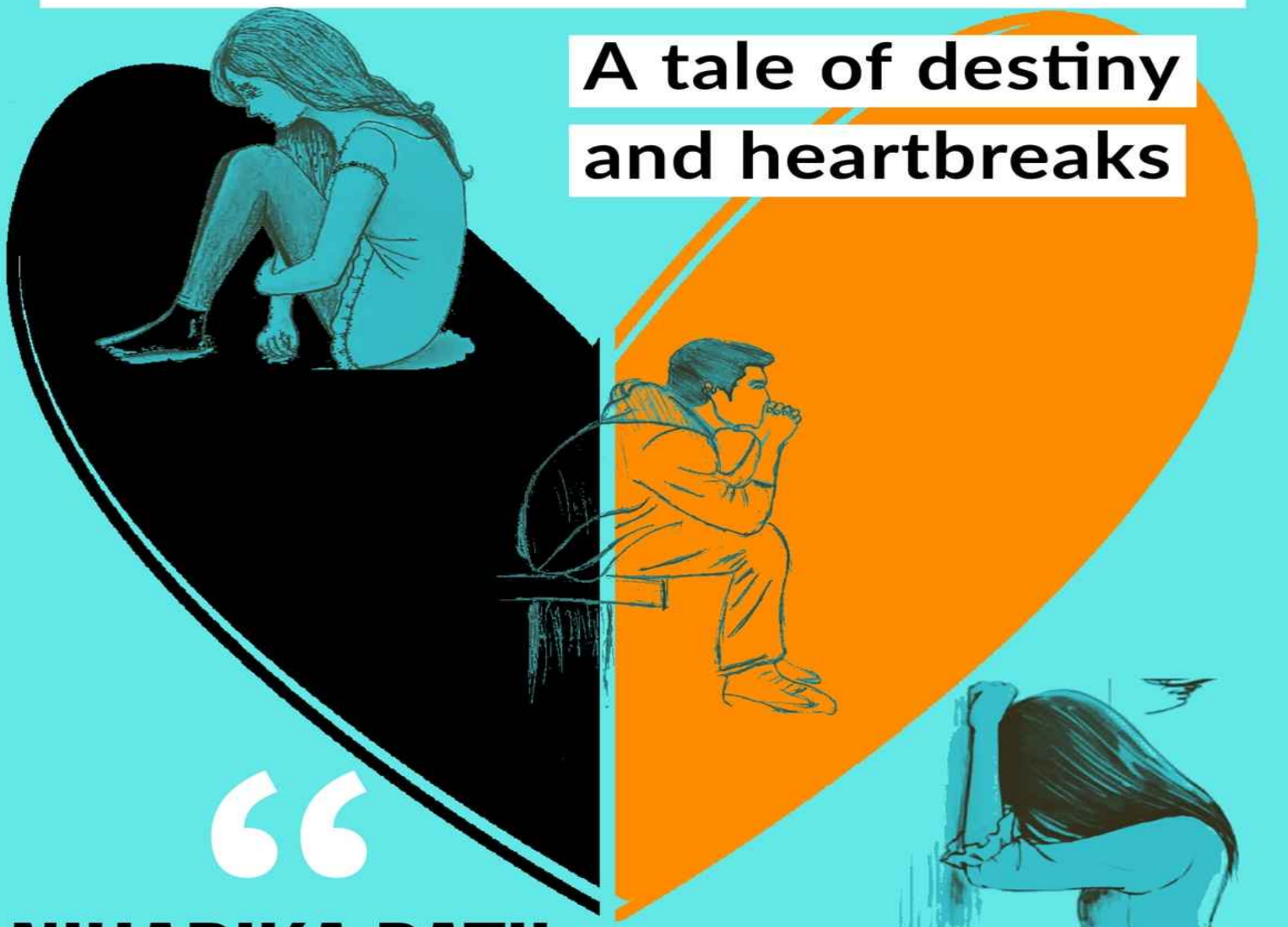
I LOVED YOU, UNTIL I COULDN'T

A tale of destiny and heartbreaks



NIHARIKA PATIL
SHUBHAM SHARMA

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I Loved You, Until I Couldn’t

By Shubham Sharma, Niharika Patil

To our families and a handful of people we call friends.

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About the Authors

Shubham was born and raised in Ramgarh Cantt, Jharkhand. He completed his schooling in his native and then did his graduation from Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra, Extension center Lalpur, It was there he developed an interest in writing and literature. He is currently based out of Chennai and working as a project engineer in Wipro Technologies.

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A story behind the happening of the book

The two authors behind this book were complete strangers living in different towns just a few months prior to the release of this book. They wrote bits and pieces which were either incomplete or screaming to be read and he texted her when he found a piece she had posted in a group on facebook. They shared some poems and snippets with each other. Almost after a year he texted her again to ask if she was interested in writing a short story together, but she had different ideas and somehow they ended up writing this book.

Acknowledgements

It’s strange how we have managed to pull off this task of completing the book which was otherwise just a dream. As much as we have invested our time and efforts into this book, there are a couple of people more who are equally responsible for its transformation. A big big thanks to Mayuri Kathariya, my unofficial critic for the book and an all time supporter. There are a gazillion things more that I must thank her for, but let me keep it short. Poornima Telsang, who has taken a pledge to fix all my grammatical errors. Probably the only time she is going to receive a thank you note from me. Roopali Narahari, who has lent me all her attention every single time I have had stories to tell her regardless of what time it was. I love you. ~ Niharika Patil

It has been extraneously overwhelming completing the book which had started off as a short story. This being our first book and not a lot of people know about it, the list of people receiving the thanks are limited. Abhishek Kumar, Aiman Iqbal and Nikhil Johnson Minz Komal Kumari and Gopal Agarwal for always seeing the writer in me. Had it not been for them then I probably would have stopped at some point. ~ Shubham Sharma

Chapter 1 : Hemant

It was just another day in the operations department of Ace softwares and services solutions, Bangalore. People working like machines on their actual machines, laptops to be precise. Their eyes completely focused on the screens and their hands seldom leaving the keyboards. Shyam and Zain two of the newly appointed guys freshly out of college were trying to figure out why a deployment was failing in Dev Environment. Despite their best efforts for the last hour they didn't manage to move past where they had started. Hemant was passing by when they asked him to help them. Hemant agreed, took a chair and started working on it.

Shyam started describing what he thought might be the reason for the failure when Hemant stopped him and told him that if he were so smart they would not be needing his help and asked them not to disturb him. Both of them didn't dare to utter a single letter in the space of the next five minutes. Hemant found the root cause in no time and troubleshooting it only took him ten more minutes. He was leaving for his desk as soon as he was done when Zain decided to ignore recent events and ask Hemant if he can at least explain what the problem was and how to resolve it so that they can do it in the future. Hemant looked back at him as if he had asked him for a kidney and said that he has a lot of work pending with him and besides this was explained in the team meeting a week back and asked them what were they doing then and left.

An annoyed Shyam whispered to Zain "why do we even bother asking him, he is so rude." to which an agitated Zain replied "yeah you are right, I don't know what he thinks of himself."

Hemant had always been like this in the way he used to treat people, harsh and upfront. This behaviour didn't win him any friends, but he wasn't trying to make any either. He was fine all by himself. He was as smart as anyone in his team, he was hated by people in

and around him for his nature, but he was adored by his boss for his work ethics and no nonsense attitude. He really was a work of art.

The clock struck 1 and it was time for lunch. Hemant reached for his spot in the cafeteria and as always Pihu, his only friend in the office, nevermind his only friend in the town was waiting for him.

"Wow. They really don't have any work in the finance department do they? I wish I was working there." Said Hemant jocularly.

Pihu was accustomed to Hemant's taunts by now, so she smiled and replied that if only he was smart enough to pull off an MBA, he could've had the privilege. Hemant acknowledged Pihu's joke with a sarcastic smile and joined her for lunch. They discussed their respective days as per their daily routine and Pihu didn't exactly approve of his behavior towards the newbies and told him that she was worried of the impression he would make on everyone and Hemant being Hemant told her that what everyone thinks about him has never been a matter of concern to him. Pihu shook her head and decided to let it go.

Chapter 2 : Shreya

You know the feeling of achievement when you have been successful in completing your engineering exactly in four years and not a day more. Not all of them can do that because not all of them have an idea about their future and hence they choose engineering.

But for Shreya it was otherwise, she had been one of the brightest students of her college and she had not left any stone unturned to prove herself as the best student. Everytime she would outdo herself in a good way when it came to academics. Back then she had successfully cleared her competitive exams with great marks after her 12th exams and had bagged a seat in one of the best colleges possible whereas now she had been chosen by one of the best firms possible.

Now Shreya was somebody you'd be glad you've met, but then not all of them would realise that. She would be that person in your life who would never compromise on her priorities to please you, but then her denial wouldn't even be upsetting.

Fast forward to the day of convocation when most students would probably see their college for one last time. Convocation is that day in everybody's life where thousands of promises are made of keeping in touch, meeting often, but we are all aware of how things are going to change. Every promise made is going to take a backseat once we are huddled with responsibilities. Not everyone can vouch for a life that is filled with success after all.

Shreya along with her parents reached the college just in time. She made sure her dad Mr. Verma met all her professors while her mom was having a good time with her friend's mother.

"Your daughter is a great student and I'm sure she will be brilliant with her work as well" said Prof. Shukla.

"Thank you very much sir" replied Mr.Verma with a sense of pride. All of Shreya's professors had similar things to say about her. It indeed was one of the best days in Mr. Verma's life. He couldn't have been more proud of his daughter.

The convocation ceremony began shortly afterwards. Every parent that day was more proud than the other. While some had a smile plastered on their face throughout the day, others had tears of joy seeing their children because they all had stopped being a student and were going to go out in the real world and handle responsibilities.

It was one hell of a day for both Shreya and her parents, yet she couldn't sleep well that night because there was something that had deprived Shreya of her sleep, she was moving to Bangalore in just a week's span. She was going to join the company that she had been selected for. Excitement and fear of a new city and her first job crept through her mind that made her go sleepless and curious.

But will life and the new city have everything fair for her in store? Only time could tell that.

Chapter 3 : Her first day

Parents are extremely wonderful beings, you need not bother about any damn thing in the world when they are there for you. Even if there are situations when they are going through a rough patch in their lives, all they show to you is love and a big smile. Shreya was lucky, she had the exact same kind of family. Not so rich as the income oriented people might call, but she always had all the things that she could ever ask for right before she opened her mouth to tell it.

It was Sunday and though Shreya was not a morning person, she was wide awake even before it was 7am. She was leaving for Bangalore that day to her new job. Still in bed, she started thinking of how she will put everything she's got into this job and make it a grand opening of her career. Her thought process was broken when she heard her mom call her name.

"Aayi mumma" she responded.

The last three days were spent in packing all the clothes, buying stuff that she thought would be necessary and of course getting all her favourite dishes made so she could savour them when she felt homesick. Indeed the last few days had been extremely exhausting and today she was leaving.

Within a few hours she was ready to leave for the station. She was going to travel by train and her dad was waiting outside with all her luggage already put into the car. She came out with her mom and 3 of them headed towards the station.

Her mom was almost in tears because Shreya was leaving. Though the vibe was upsetting, there was one thing, she couldn't have been more proud of her daughter. Mrs. Verma hugged her daughter for a good one minute right before it was time for the train

to leave. Once inside she bid goodbye to her parents and settled in her seat. She read some books, had her dinner and eventually fell asleep.

The next thing she opened her eyes to was the outskirts of Bangalore. She had jitters in her stomach thinking about the new life that was ahead of her. She reached the city as per the scheduled timing. The cab was already waiting for her outside the station. The driver helped her with the luggage and they left for her apartment. Throughout the way, all she did was peep outside the window and look at how beautiful and busy the streets of the city were. There were people doing all kinds of business, while some were selling tea, the others were attending calls in their vehicles. While some were making huge dosas in the taprees, others were welcoming customers into their shops. It was a wholesome experience for a newcomer. By the end of their mini city tour she was sure of one thing, this city was going to take her through a roller coaster ride that she wasn't sure she would love, but was definitely curious about. Once into her apartment, she met her roommate Priyam who was her friend from her old college. Without any further delay she freshened up and got into a pair of formals that she had specifically picked for her first day and left for the office.

While Shreya was all excited and happy, things were not going so smooth for Hemant that day. He had been working on a production server outage all day, which had a straight impact on client business. He had been on call for three hours straight with different teams to get the issue resolved. He was all flustered and worn out, but only a few minutes after he had resolved the issue his boss dropped another bomb on him. He had to take the responsibility of a new girl in the office. He was told to get her in sync with the kind of work that they do here. Since he was relatively new himself he could do a better job at it. Now as you’d imagine Hemant was not pleased at all, just picture yourself working on a production issue of highest priority one moment and being asked to babysit someone the other, it would frustrate anyone, for Hemant it was a hit on his ego, but you just can’t say no to your boss can you? That's just how corporate works,

if your boss asks you of something you keep your head down and get it done. Yes he was a hothead in the beginning, but he did get used to this idea after a few months. When Hemant told about this to Pihu, she couldn’t hide her smile and started mocking Hemant as per their usual ritual, but she also asked him to at least try to be nice, afterall she didn’t want people to hate him. Hemant found Shreya sitting in a corner in the office. He headed straight towards her

"Are you Shreya?" Asked Hemant.
"Yes, Sir (rookie mistake)." Replied Shreya
"First of all don't call me sir, second you will be reporting to me temporarily."
"Okay."

This would have been the end of conversation for most people, but Shreya was not most people, and she was not someone who could contain her curiosity.

"So what exactly do we do here?" Asked Shreya trying to start a conversation.
"Are we in a Hurry?" Asked Hemant, still miffed.
"I'm sorry." Replied Shreya with her head hung low.
"If we are not in a hurry then we start tomorrow." Said Hemant and left without waiting for a reply from Shreya.
"Ok sure." Said Shreya almost in a whisper.

Now this may sound like a rude conversation from Hemant’s part, but he had higher standards in that particular department. Shreya now had an idea what she was in for, but was she prepared for it? Only time would tell.

Chapter 4 : The battles ahead

Shreya left for her apartment early, she was glad that she was not all alone and that Priyam would keep her company. The Bangalore traffic was as hectic as always, what should have been a pretty straightforward 30min trip, took her 1 hour. She reached her room, her roommate Priyam was on the way. She started setting up her room and reflecting on the day she had just had. The first day is always memorable, the new town, the new surroundings, the office, the people, the food and everything. You kinda get the idea of what your life is gonna be like for a few years, or as long as you stay there. Priyam arrived shortly after and she was as excited to listen about Shreya's first day.

Shreya told her about everything, the traffic, the office, the people she had met and of course the highlight of her day, Hemant. Priyam too hated the idea of Shreya working under someone so ill-mannered, but Shreya was not so quick to jump into judgement. She had always tried to understand the people around her and why they are like that, there's a reason why she had always been so likable, in her school, her college. She was absolutely adored by her professors. She was perfect in every sense of the word, even if someone did not start on good terms with her, she would always find a way to charm them with her nature. And if we look at her appearance, she was an art, the perfect skin, long straight hairs, big almond eyes, the beautiful lips and curves, the yoga that she had been doing since forever really showed. She effortlessly turned every eye in every goddamn room. In the office Pihu finally had some competition.

She had her fair share of admirers, but surprisingly she had never been in a relationship, her career being her first priority. Though in 12th standard she was close to this guy, but only ever regarded him as a friend and when she got to know that the guy was expecting more out of the bond, she very calmly explained him that

it’s never gonna happen with the exams coming and the ever increasing competition to get into a good engineering college, but some guys don’t handle rejection very well. That guy in particular started spreading rumours that she had tried to kiss him and he rejected her advances and this became a gossip of the school. Shreya was a brave girl, when this gossip reached her, she unhesitatingly slapped the shit out of him in front of the class and complained to her teachers as well. From that point on, she liked to maintain a certain distance from guys and in all honesty her trust issues were justified.

Priyam and Shreya had their food and went to their beds, but all Shreya could wonder was how the next day was going to be. She would finally get to meet her new teammates. She was excited and happy again, she did her best to get whatever had happened between her and Hemant out of her head. After all, tomorrow is a new day.

Shreya managed to wake up on time just with the help of an alarm. While back in her city, she always woke up to her mom's soft words and immense love, now here she was dragging herself out of her bed to get going for the day. She quickly freshened up and got ready. She had worn her black pencil skirt that was paired with a white formal shirt. To go with it she had picked a pair of black heels and her ever so beautiful hair let loose. If that wasn't enough of a look to die for, she carried her spectacles that gave the entire attire which was otherwise hot, a tinge of cuteness.

Shreya reached her office well in time and started talking to whoever she found on her way and appeared familiar. Right then she saw Hemant make his way into the office and towards her desk. Since she did not want an awful day for herself, she promised herself that she would not do anything to upset him or anybody else in the office.

"Shreya, ummm today I will introduce you to other people on the team and we can have a short meeting shortly after that." said Hemant.

"Meeting regarding?" asked Shreya with no clue as to why she was supposed to attend a meeting on day two.

"Your agenda for the week"

"Oh! Okay"

The introduction part went smooth. She made sure she spoke to a few people and asked them for their numbers and they were very happy to include Shreya into the team owing to the fact that she was very sweet other than of course the hotness factor.

Few minutes later Hemant called Shreya into the meeting hall and discussed with her the tasks or the set up that she was supposed to do. The plan for the week was more of an informative session with all sections of the team. She didn't really have any project to start with.

Shreya as per the instructions given by Hemant, went to their senior Shweta to take all the details for the day. Shweta merely had any work to assign to Shreya, hence she gave Shreya some problems to figure out. Shreya completed them within an hour and was wandering about the office, while on the other hand Hemant was extremely stressed regarding some issue going on.

Shreya went back to Hemant's desk to see if he had any work to assign.

"Hemant I am done for the day. I finished everything long ago and I'm just roaming about the office, can I get some actual work to do?" Said Shreya.

Hemant who was already stressed lost his temper.

"You think we don't do any real work here, isn't it? Now you'll sit with me and help me resolve this issue no matter how long it gets" replied Hemant angrily.

Shreya had no idea what she did wrong, but she thought it was better to keep mum at the moment and she simply nodded her head

in response. She was now beginning to wonder if her life would ever get back to being normal while Hemant was a part of it.

By the time the entire issue was resolved it was 9pm and Shreya was famished and equally tired, she couldn't wait to get home and crash on her bed when Hemant dropped another bomb.

"Shreya you are reporting tomorrow by 8am."

Her life in the new city could have been anything, but it chose to be challenging.

Chapter 5 : I love You

Hemant woke up early in the morning, it was a normal day for everyone else. The sun shining, the birds chirping, the newspaper guy dropping newspapers to every house, streets filled with horns from vehicles even at 6 in the morning, but for Hemant this was going to be a day he would never forget.

Hemant had hardly been able to sleep all night after he received the news that his grandmother had suffered a heart attack. After a couple of hours, he learnt that though she was at the very brink, she had fought and was stable now. That news came as much of a relief to him. Everything had been taken care of and Hemant was receiving all the necessary updates regarding his granny’s health.

Hemant did not have a normal childhood, most of the memories he had of it involved traumatic experiences that would break anyone's resolve. But the few happy memories he had, all of them had his grandmother in it. All night he had flashbacks of how much his grandmother loved him, the different foods that she would make for him whenever he visited her in his summer vacations, the games they would play. Ludo, carrom, hide and seek, the stories she would tell him. He just loved being around her.

The thought that he might lose her had him rattled and shaking all night. The flashbacks, they were not all good either. He remembered how he had never had stability in life, no constants whatsoever, people came and people left. He had never managed to make a half decent friend whom he could share all the pain he was carrying within, but in time he had managed to mould himself into a person who wouldn't ever need anything from anyone. He was adept at hiding his emotions. No one tried to know his pain, and he never felt the necessity to look for someone who did. Now everything started to change, the pain was getting harder and harder to bear with every passing moment, he finally needed a friend, a person,

anyone who would understand him, someone who wouldn't run away when he revealed every last bit of the agony he was hiding for years.

The only person who came to his mind was Pihu, and it made perfect sense, after all she was closer to him than anyone had ever been, he had feelings for Pihu for a while now and can you blame him? Imagine only ever being around one person and that person is just too good with everything. The way he/she deals with people is so perfect that not a single soul has got any complaints, and that person is doing everything possible to not mess their life or anybody else's. You see someone's traits, and if that person is gifted with killer looks, then there's nothing you can do not to fall in love with them.

But this was not as simple as it sounds, the good guys are never sure if a girl loves them back. Hemant was feeling the same, he was not sure how she would react. It was possible that she would say yes and they would live happily ever after, but it was also possible that she would say no, get offended, never talk to him again and he would lose the only good friend he had. But now the equation was different, he needed her more than ever and everything that he had been going through clouded his judgement. He decided that he was going to tell her everything.

Chapter 6 : Pihu

Pihu, if it was not for her, this story would have been very different. She was an intern in the same office as Hemant, in the finance department. She had an MBA degree from IIM bangalore, but her grades did no justice whatsoever to how smart she was. She was easily the one of the most hardworking people in the office. Hemant and Pihu had joined a month apart, but they immediately hit it off, like they were two lost souls. It was almost surprising to see two people of completely different nature get along so well with each other. Maybe it's true what they say "opposites attract". And as much as they denied it, they did attract each other.

As busy as they both were, they always found time for each other. They would find any corner available and discuss their respective days in the office, their likes, dislikes, politics, movies, songs, anything as long as it was with each other. The gossip that went around the office about them being in a relationship made Hemant mad, but Pihu was calmer than an ocean during sunset. She was unfazed. Maybe she had imagined what her life would be like with a guy who would provide her with his undivided attention and she loved the idea of it. Although Pihu carried with her a bag full of secrets, the biggest secret of them was the job offer she had received which would require her to move to the USA in the coming weeks. She was torn in the process of thinking what she wanted more. On one hand she could have a decent job, stay close to her family and be with Hemant and on the other hand there was a career she had dreamed of since she understood the meaning and importance of dreams in one's life.

If she had chosen to stay here she would be turning down an opportunity of a lifetime, and for what? The vague idea of love that had baffled her all her lifetime, and who is to say that Hemant will not move to better things himself if given the opportunity, after all it had only been 5 months, but there was no denying the fact that these 5

months had been the most memorable 5 months of her life. She had finally found someone who got her, someone who didn’t just want to touch her skin, but to dive deep in her glittery dark eyes reminiscent of a galaxy, not just to kiss her misty red lips like those roses in the morning dew, but hold her hand and never let go. Someone who didn’t just love her body that was carved by the gods themselves, but loved the pure soul that was hidden within. If she had chosen to leave, she might leave a void too big in Hemant’s heart and he would never be able to fill it. It was a timebomb ticking on Hemant and if it did explode, it would shatter Hemant into pieces so small that he might never be able to join them back which would leave him incapable of loving someone ever again.

Though Pihu was firm on what she wanted from life, she had no idea of the storm that was waiting to make an entrance in her life. While she was making plans on how to break the news of shifting to another job to Hemant, he also was up to something.

It was a Saturday evening when he called Pihu and invited her to her favorite restaurant at 8pm. He got dressed and left for the restaurant. He was stuck in the traffic for a while, so by the time he reached, Pihu was already there, looking more stunning than she ever had. She was wearing a black satin dress, which perfectly accompanied her skin tone. She was looking more beautiful than the sky that day, even though the sky had a full moon and all the stars were shining, but they still didn’t compare to her. While she looked hot as always, he also made quite a decent number of heads turn. He had made sure everything that the night was as perfect as Pihu.

They ordered everything that was Pihu's favourite, by now he knew what she exactly liked and how. Pihu wasn't surprised or expecting anything out of this gesture of his because they had been out on dinner a couple of times before. She also decided she would talk about her new job tonight. Both had different agendas and both of these agendas would have a very big impact on both of their lives.

"You like the food?" Asked Hemant.

"Oh! I love it, how much time did you take to cook it?" Replied Pihu jokingly.

"Well not food, but there is something cooking in my mind."

"Sounds rather interesting," said Pihu and they laughed.

"Lets go to the balcony, the view there is absolutely breathtaking, just like you, if I may so myself." Said Hemant and got up from his chair.

They both headed towards the balcony, it was actually a beautiful view and was quite peaceful. Hemant turned towards Pihu and said

"Pihu, you know you're the only person besides my mum and my grandmother that know me so well. I have always been quite a reserved person all my life, but now it seems like I know why it's just you. I didn't realise until this morning that I would ever talk about this infront of you, but now I can't wait to tell you. Pihu I love you."

Pihu went blank. While she wanted to talk about splitting the journey, he wanted to walk with her for a lifetime. It's strange how minds are capable of holding so many thoughts and yet all your face shows is a smile. Pihu wasn't sure as to what was happening and how she was supposed to react. It was all she had ever imagined, but the sad part was she had to deny the possibility of them being together. For a moment she was convinced about every word that he had told because it was all true, but she had to walk away so far from his life that she would be forgotten. Pihu was so lost that Hemant literally had to shake her off and bring her to reality.

"Pihu are you going to say something or should I die of this suspense?" Joked Hemant

"Hemant, I don't know which part of my role I overdid which led you into thinking that maybe we can be together, but let me clear it to you, we cannot be. I have different aspirations and so do you. Let's not get into this and ruin what we have. I am sorry that I didn’t tell you about this earlier, but I'm moving to the US soon. What will be the point of all this? It is not going to work." Said Pihu in a single breath.

"Pihu what are you saying? Imagine our lives together, we understand each other so well. Distance is just a reason for people to get seperated. I know us, it'll never come in our way, don't let that one thing spoil a lifetime of happiness" said Hemant.

"I don't know why this is so difficult for you to understand, looks like I'm good for your ego and that's why you want me, isn't it? It's funny how in a matter of a few days you got to this conclusion. Look, Hemant it is very simple, I do not want any baggage from my past into my future especially at this point in time where all that matters to me is right in front of me. Anyway it was a good evening. Thank you for inviting me. Goodbye."

Pihu left, leaving behind Hemant to his thoughts.

Once Pihu reached her apartment, she cried her heart out. She did not know why she was doing that to herself and him. She obviously knew she did not mean whatever she told him, but she knew it would be powerful enough to push him away from her after all she had some more days in the office and she did not want him loitering around her. She knew she had made a decision that would cost her her future, but she was ready for it.

Chapter 7 : The breakdown.

The night suddenly went from breathtaking to unbreathable in a matter of seconds. It all started to fall apart around Hemant, the sky was not as beautiful anymore, the winds took a pause, the moon had turned dark. Everything crashed to the ground so swiftly that Hemant couldn't find a place to hide. He was buried under all the debris of emotions he had been carrying since he was a small boy, which was now multiplied several times over by the words that had just come out of Pihu's mouth. The worst he had feared was a no, and maybe in his mind he was prepared for it, after all he knew the kind of person he had been, but was he so bad ..? That too with Pihu, someone who he had treated like she meant the world to him. I guess that's just the risk you are taking when you confide your world in a person.

That night he wanted to find solace in Pihu's warmth, but instead he had to settle for the burning splash of alcohol, that he had never even tried before, but there's a first time for everything. Hemant was an emotional wreck that night, without any shoulder to cry on. With every sip of alcohol he was reliving the trauma he had been blessed with. A dysfunctional family, a non existent father, being bullied throughout his life.

He was 6 when his dad and his mom decided to part ways, they were in a very toxic relationship, most of his memories of his mom and his dad were blurred, but the remaining were only of them screaming at each other. After the divorce his mom won full custody of Hemant and against all odds and stigmas brought him up on her own. At times Hemant would ask his mom "when would dad return home" and she would say ''soon beta, he is just too busy right now with work". But with time Hemant grew up sooner than he should have and the questions stopped. The society back then was twice as regressive as it is now, and their actions were never in the best interest of a separated wife and a single mother, but she was good at

hiding the scars of a failed marriage, the load of raising a child alone, and the never ending taunts from the society, but it was not only her who was good at hiding stuff. Hemant never told his mom about the constant abuses and bullying in the school, how his classmates would tease him about his dad, never invited him to play with them, how no one invited him to their birthday parties or came to his. All this was taking a toll on him. While his mom became stronger and stronger, Hemant only pretended to be as strong as her. But the thing with playing pretend is someday reality hits you so hard that the ground is sucked from beneath your feet, and what you will experience is a never ending fall. Perhaps that day had come for him. Pihu was the only thing standing between him and the realization of how lonely he really is, with her out of the picture, he was once again ‘lonely’.

Due to a release that was just a couple of days ahead, almost everybody in Shreya's team was working overtime. All Shreya heard people talk about was related to this release, but in all this Hemant was as lost as a stranded kid in a huge crowd. It seemed as though he was physically there, but mentally he was fighting wars. Shreya couldn't help but wonder what must have been the issue. She made several attempts to talk to Hemant, but all of it was in vain. It was as though Hemant had turned a deaf ear to everybody around him.

It was a Friday evening and when Shreya was about to leave the office, Shweta called her and informed her to join Hemant to solve an issue that was persistent for quite some time. She thought to herself that she would try one more time to talk to Hemant and if he does not respond well, that would be it.

"Hey." Shreya said upon spotting Hemant gazing at his laptop.
"Why are you still here?" asked Hemant surprised.
"Shweta asked me to join you." replied Shreya.

It took about an hour and a half to ensure everything was up and working once again. They took a sigh of relief and Hemant laid his head on the table and closed his eyes. Shreya was looking at him as though it would help her read his mind. She was so absorbed into

her thoughts that she didn't realise that she was directly staring at Hemant. About 5 mins later she got into her senses and felt lucky that nobody had noticed her stare at him. She very feebly called out Hemant's name to inform him that she was leaving, but he didn't respond. She tried again and this time he opened his eyes and a drop of tear escaped which perhaps he was trying to hold back with all his might. Shreya was confused but instinctively she searched for a handkerchief and gave it to him. Hemant was at the brim of holding back all the emotions and now he knew beyond this it was a lost cause so he let the tears flow. Shreya took a chair and sat beside him. Though she had no clue what the matter was, she felt bad for Hemant, because nobody in the world should have the need to bottle up their emotions so much that it eventually turns into a battle of peace. "Hemant, I do not know what the matter is, but whenever you're ready I'm here" said Shreya breaking the silence. She wasn't really expecting him to tell her everything, but she wanted to make sure he didn't feel deserted. After about 10 minutes when Shreya had gone back to her imagination and thinking, Hemant spoke. "You know from when I was 4 years old to until I moved to this city, my fondest memories have been of those times that I spent with my grandmother and today she was in ICU. Losing her would mean losing my partner in happiness. I do not know what I would do had she left me behind"

He took a pause. Shreya was not sure if she was supposed to acknowledge she was listening, so she just brushed his shoulders.

He began to talk again.

"And like all of this was not enough of a reason to cry for, I have pretty much ruined everything I had with Pihu. But probably this is time giving it back to me for being the kind of person I am. But you know Shreya, I wasn't always like this, I have been made like this by the kind of life that I've led. It scares me to let anybody close to me because, see now what's happening, I am crying over a girl who was my only friend, my go-to person for everything and I just don't know……."

He couldn't manage to speak anymore. Shreya was at loss of words. She quickly offered him some water to drink and waited patiently for him to get better.

Chapter 8 : A trip down the memory lane.

As soon as his leave was approved he left all his concerns behind, took his bike and hit the road. He promised himself he would not think about the office, or Pihu in this trip and thoroughly enjoy his trip, after all it was for the first time he was taking a leave since he had started working, and the break was well deserved. Whilst on the road, he was enjoying every turn, every bump, the air felt so fresh and the roads were so peaceful. It felt so good to not be in the city.

It was a 5 hour journey and his first stop was the hospital his grandmother was admitted in. She was getting discharged that day. Hemant arrived at the hospital and couldn't wait any longer to see his granny, he rushed through the reception and the stairs, barged into the room and hugged her tightly. She was so delighted to see him and Hemant, he was in tears for the second time in the last few days. This was quite a moment, but here's the thing about moments, they pass, and soon his granny started with her complaints…

You have become skinny..!
You have forgotten me..!
You don't talk to me anymore..!
You don't visit anymore..!
You must have other girls in your life now..!
Tell me who she is?

As any grandchild would normally do, Hemant laughed off these accusations and with a smile on his face reassured her that she was still the most important woman in his life.

The nurse came in with the final reports and said the words Hemant's granny had been wanting to listen for so long, "you can take her home..!". Hemant completed all the formalities and took her home.

The house was renovated a while ago, but they had decided to not change some parts of the house, the garden, the porch, the trees and the swing. They all brought back so many happy memories of Hemant's childhood and they were the subject of conversation between those two all day. Even in her condition she managed to make Hemant's favourite paranthas.

As ecstatic as Hemant was throughout the week, his granny couldn't help but notice that something was off about him. You know parents, they can always tell if something is wrong, it's almost a sixth sense. Hemant told her all about Pihu, and like any Granny proud of her boy would say, she said "don't think too much about her, she didn't deserve someone as handsome as you. I will find you a better girl, our neighbor the shuklas have a beautiful daughter, maybe i will talk you up next time I go to their house for a tea". She was trying so hard to cheer him up, and she succeeded or she felt like she did. Hemant was good at hiding stuff, only he knew what he had lost. With Pihu on mind, it would be rather hard for him to stay all by himself. He was extremely glad that he had considered this leave because, above everything he had a lot of free time in his hand and that meant enough space for self reflection, which given the current situation was very important for Hemant. He just fell on his bed without any tension of waking up early the next morning and rushing to the office. He finally felt at home and probably at peace.

Chapter 9 : Rishi is the boss

It was a Monday morning and Shreya was still in the hangover of Sunday, she was late for the office for the first time since she had joined, and the last thing she wanted in her life was to get bashed from Hemant. By the time she reached the office she had memorised her excuse like a kid from kindergarten. She went to her desk and was waiting for Hemant to call her for the scrum. She did not hear anything from him even though it was 10 mins past the rendezvous time. So, she went to his desk to find it empty and only when she enquired her colleague, she learnt that he was on leave for the next one week. Just then she saw her manager come towards her shortly followed by a guy. "Shreya since Hemant is on leave, I would want you to join Rishi and learn whatever best you can from him for the next one week" said Manisha

"Sure Manisha." Shreya said with a smile.

"So I leave you two by yourself now." Said Manisha and made her way towards her cabin.

"Hi! I am Rishi" said Rishi, extending his hand.

"Shreya" replied Shreya and gladly shook his hand.

"So Shreya, we will briefly discuss your work until today so I know what to expect from you and what we must learn to proceed." said Rishi.

"Sure."

She liked how he said we instead of you, often these small things add up to make a great boss or mentor. She was glad she had one such mentor, but she missed having Hemant around though all he did was rant at her, but the last time they talked he was different, he was himself, he had let his guard off. Thinking of him made her anxious. She hoped he was fine, after all hoping was the extent to which he had given her the access to his life.

Rishi and Shreya went on to discuss everything that she had worked on until that day and made an agenda for the week. After a good round of discussion, they headed for the cafeteria. Unlike Hemant, Rishi had a guy next door attitude, he could pick a conversation with anybody out of the blue without making them feel uncomfortable. He was tall, had a wheatish complexion and big brown eyes, his smile had a weird effect on everybody. In short he looked cute. Period.

Even though it had been three months, Shreya had never before been to the cafeteria with so many people. She liked the fact that she would get to know more people. Rishi introduced Shreya to the entire lot present and they all started talking about all random things like movies that released recently, places good for shopping and what not. She loved how that informal conversation added a tinge of relaxation to their routine. She made it a point to go out with Rishi as often as possible. That day went more smoothly than she had expected it to.

When your work becomes fun there is no room for being late. Shreya reached office 5 mins earlier than the entry time. Rishi was already there. Irrespective of the amount of workload Rishi had, he always appeared calm. Since Hemant was on leave, all the extra work was distributed between Shreya and Rishi. Rishi made it a point to complete everything before either of them left the office in the evening. Though everything was going smooth, Shreya kept thinking of Hemant. That day by the time they finished all the work, it was quite late in the evening and so Rishi offered to drop Shreya home. Though she politely denied, he insisted on leaving her.

"So? Which place are you from?" asked Rishi during their ride back home.

"I am from Pune, I shifted here a couple of months ago" replied Shreya.

"First time away from home?"

"Yeah first time" "I hope our city has been treating you well" said Rishi with a smile on his face and stopped the vehicle on the side of the road.

"What's wrong?" asked Shreya with a worried look.

"I have a little work in the store nearby. Is it okay if I get back in 5 mins?"

"Sure, take your time."

Shreya knew there was nothing to be worried about, yet being in somebody else's vehicle at that time of the day scared her. She tried to seem normal and started humming a song to keep herself distracted. In about 10 mins time Rishi was back and he had quite some covers in his hands.

"Here this is for you" said Rishi and handed over an ice cream cone to Shreya.

"Umm thanks. I thought you had work" replied Shreya.

"See work." Rishi said, showing the covers in his hands.

"Besides it is not manners to make somebody wait, so the ice cream." Rishi continued.

"Well if waiting for 10 mins means getting an ice cream, I would wait and wait and wait" said Shreya and burst into laughter.

It was the first time she had spoken so carelessly to Rishi, it felt like talking to a friend and not a senior. Throughout her way back home, they kept talking. The ice had finally broken between the two of them perhaps because of an ice-cream. She now seemed more comfortable with him than she was probably 10 mins ago. She had finally found a friend apart from Priyam who was making an attempt to understand her. It was a delight.

Once back home, she excitedly narrated whatever had happened to Priyam. It had become a routine for them to talk to each other about how their day had been. Shreya was happy and Priyam was glad that she finally had a friend in her office. Priyam worked as a product engineer in Dell. Priyam and Shreya had known each other for more than 5 years now. They were almost inseparable ever since. It was almost like they were siblings. Both of their parents had been very happy when they had learnt that both of the girls had gotten a job in Bangalore and had their offices nearby. Priyam was a very composed person, she tried keeping her life as simple as

possible. Though people loved her company, she hardly had four friends that she looked up to. She was extremely cute and chubby with a fair complexion and an affinity to making people laugh. Since the time they had been friends, Priyam had noticed one thing about Shreya, she had a thing for problems. It was as though problems had rented themselves into Shreya's life and that was all the while more a reason that Priyam was always worried about Shreya and her whereabouts.

Within a span of three days, Shreya got much better with what she had been working upon and Rishi was the reason. He made sure he was available whenever she was stuck with any tiny problem. Apart from their professional equation, their friendship also made quite some progress. She started hanging out more with Rishi and his team.

People usually slide into the Saturday mode post lunch on friday, especially when a group of friends work in the same office. It was a Friday afternoon when Rishi, Shreya and all the other people in the team were having their lunch in the cafeteria when one of them pitched an idea of going for a movie followed by dinner on the weekend. Shreya wasn't sure if she was even invited because she wasn't exactly friends with all of them. She chose to remain quiet while they all discussed the plan. Later that evening while Rishi was dropping Shreya home, he asked her regarding her confirmation about the plan.

"Will everybody else be okay if I join?" asked Shreya.

"Come on we aren't kids studying in fourth grade to have a problem with you joining. It will be fun" said Rishi.

"Well then I am sure we have enough room for a friend of mine?"

"One moment you do not want to come and the next you behave like you are incharge, you need mental attention. But yeah please get your friend along." said Rishi.

Once home it took Shreya 40 minutes to convince Priyam to tag along, it indeed was a difficult thing to do, but the results were fruitful. The next big thing on the list was to choose the clothes that

they were supposed to wear, they spent their next one hour finding a dress that wasn't too party like, but also not too sober. They also decided upon what footwear and accessories they should wear. After a pretty tiring selection session, they crashed on their beds. Shreya was happy, she was finally getting to live the kind of life she wanted, but even in all this she missed Hemant. She closed her eyes to his thoughts and fell asleep.

Chapter 10 : Rishi is a friend

It was a Saturday morning and the clock had struck 10 when Shreya woke up to Rishi's call. In her state of sleep she did not bother to see the name that was flashing on the screen and she directly picked the call.

"Hellooo" Shreya said, still in her sleep.

"I am sorry, I thought you'd be up by now. Call me back later, sorry" said Rishi apologetically. Shreya realised it was Rishi and woke up with a jerk.

"No no Rishi tell me what is it, I am awake now"

"I am so sorry, I only called to tell you to be ready by 8, movie plan got cancelled, we are going to a club"

"Noted. Thanks" "I am sorry again, you go back to sleep. I will see you at 8. Bye" said Rishi and hung up the call.

Shreya fell on her pillow and tried sleeping, but couldn't. She woke Priyam up and told her the new plan. Now they were supposed to find everything over again that was club friendly, all their preparations had gone in vain. They quickly ordered some breakfast and ate it, then they went to a nearby mall and shopped till the last penny.

Rishi had come to pick the girls up. Shreya and Priyam had taken their own sweet time to get dressed and looking at them one could tell they had made justice to whatever amount of time they had taken. Shreya had worn a red dress along with black stilettos and red lipstick. The lipstick accentuated her look in all possible ways. Other than that she had put on some mascara and kohl and she was ready to kill. And Priyam had worn a turquoise dress with black heels and a pink shade for the lip. It was a war between the eyes of the admirers and their conscience and clearly the eyes won because once they landed on the girls, there was no return ticket. Rishi as well was awestruck by how Shreya looked. He knew he always had

a soft corner for Shreya, but if it was evolving into something more, he wasn't sure.

Once they reached there, all they could sense or feel was loud music and alcohol. They were dragged inside by multiple hands whose owners weren't even friends with them, but then alcohol is a player. The place was dimly lit by multiple lights that were either in red, yellow or blue and a few lanterns here and there. It had an aroma which was now mixed with the smell of multiple deodorants that people wore. Everybody grooved to the music like it was their part time business to dance. It took them quite some effort to find everybody else. They went to a table that was large enough for them. They ordered food and drinks. Shreya had never tried alcohol, so she settled for a mocktail as did Priyam. Those of them that did not have to drive, drank so much that they were capable of drunk dialling an ex. Rishi went for a cocktail as he had to remain sober to leave the girls safely back to their places. Rishi was a responsible man, he always knew when to stop.

After a few drinks everybody started going towards the dance floor. Everybody danced in a way that showed no care in the world. After a point nobody knew who they were dancing with anymore, all that mattered was dancing. The music was the only companion for every soul that was dancing. After a few moments Rishi hesitatingly asked Shreya.

"Dance?"
"Sure" Shreya gladly joined.

Shreya was dressed like she belonged to some museum, but once on the floor, she danced as though she had intended on breaking her limbs. It was cool how she did not care about Rishi's presence and just grooved the way she understood music. It indeed was one hell of a night. While Shreya was busy dancing, Rishi was lost in her. The way she danced without any care, the way she looked that night, the kind of a person she was, it was a combination made by the gods. She had everything that a man could die for and Rishi was starting to be that man. It was as though something had

taken over his senses and he could not move or take his eyes off her. Priyam was noticing all of this from afar. She knew she had to talk to Shreya about this.

After a while, all of them sat down, ate and chatted like old friends who have met after ages. By the time they were done, it was 11pm. Everybody other than Rishi, Priyam and Shreya went their way and promised Priyam to meet sometime soon. Rishi was supposed to drop both the girls and then head home. On their way back home they all spoke to each other.

"So Priyam did you like coming with us?" Asked Rishi

"Is that even a question to be asked, of course not" replied Priyam with a smirk.

All three of them laughed and continued chatting till they reached the apartment. It was a fun evening, more so for Rishi who had unknowingly started enjoying Shreya's company. Later in the night Priyam thought of telling Shreya what she had noticed.

"Shreya did you ever feel like Rishi likes you?" Asked Priyam

"Of course not. He is good with every single person in our office. Hemant is a good friend of Rishi. Imagine Hemant being somebody's friend. Rishi is just a guy who knows how to talk nicely. That's it. There's nothing more to it. Today was the first time you saw us together, so you must've felt that, but there is nothing of that sort." Shreya said all in a single breath.

"Ummm okay if you say so, but I had to talk because I saw the way he was looking at you while you were dancing like you were some bonus pay cheque. Maybe I'm wrong." Said Priyam.

Though Shreya had denied the existence of such feelings from Rishi's side, she couldn't help but wonder if it was true.

Chapter 11 : And he’s back

As it is with the good times, the week went by in no time, and it was time for Hemant to leave. He took his granny's blessings and departed. He had to return to his daily 10 to 6 life. As for most people this gets boring after a month or so, but Hemant loved the work he did. He liked the risky nature of his job. He worked in the IT operations department, to be honest about 80% of people in the IT industry don’t know what operations is, but keeping it short it has to do with making sure that all the applications are available for consumer use 24X7 and the applications are running seamlessly on the infrastructure allocated to them. Operations is a thankless job though. In development when you commit a mistake, what's the worst possible thing that can happen? Your boss will scold you and ask you to do the whole part again. Whilst in operations you could be doing a fantastic job for 364 days, and the one day you screw up you are fired. Clients don't tolerate any kind of impact on their business due to human error without looking for heads to lay off. But that's the part Hemant had grown up to be fond of, the unstable nature of the job.

Hemant reached his campus 20 minutes early so that he could spend some time understanding the developments that had happened during his absence. He walked toward the lift and the gates were about to close, but someone stopped the gates from closing and Hemant got inside. That someone was Pihu, and as much as Hemant was trying to change the absence of a thank you, his side was justified. Pihu thought so hard to get a conversation going, but to no avail. It was almost like her soul would not allow her to speak after what she had done to him. Hemant on the other side was as cold as liquid nitrogen, he had made his mind up that he would not acknowledge her presence and so he did not. As broken as he was, he was a man of resolve. As soon as the lift reached the 7th floor, Hemant barged outside, went inside his office, surprisingly greeted everyone along the way, and went straight to his cubicle.

Usually he didn’t quite believe in such formalities and he always had his Headphones on, and rarely acknowledged anyone, but this was a welcome change for the other people in the office. He dropped his bag on his desk and went to his boss's cabin.

"Good morning Manisha." Said Hemant

"Hey Good Morning, you’re back..!" Said Manisha with a warm smile.

"yes pretty much" replied Hemant

“So how was your break?"

"It was very good actually, much needed. Thanks and what did I miss out on?"

"Nothing major, we ran into a few issues with our AWS infrastructure, but the team took care of it."

"Oh good."

"Also Shreya has been working with Rishi for the past week, you can ask her to join you again if you want."

"Ok i will think about it, see you later Manisha, thanks."

Now if it were anyone else Hemant would’ve asked Shreya to join him back in an instant, but Rishi was one of the few guys whom Hemant was on good terms with. There is always a guy in every office, who just can’t be hated, Rishi was that guy. So Hemant decided to let Shreya work with Rishi for a while. Hemant started working. When Shreya saw Hemant, she immediately went to him and asked how he is now. He said he is doing well now, they talked a little about his break and then Shreya asked him if she can join him again.

"So how is it, do you hate working with Rishi?" Asked Hemant jokingly

"Nothing like that, I saw you were back and I thought that I am supposed to work with you again."

"No you can continue working with Rishi for a while."

Shreya was a little disappointed to hear this, maybe she had developed a liking for Hemant’s tantrums and outbursts. Hemant saw the disappointment on her face. "Okay I will call you to observe

and help if I am working on anything major, how does that sound?" Hemant said.

"Perfect, thanks." Said Shreya, gave a smile and left. Hemant felt good about Shreya wanting to join him back.

Soon it was time for lunch hours and Hemant left for the cafeteria. On his way he saw Pihu standing in the hallway with her bag and some papers in her hands. They did make eye contact for a very brief moment, but Hemant looked away and left. It seemed as though in those brief moments when their eyes had met, she was trying to say something, but he wasn't in a state to decipher her silences anymore. That day Hemant had no one to sit and eat with, because this role was reserved for Pihu, and with her out of the frame, he had the whole table to himself and he knew it would be like that for a long time now. He finished his tasks early and left for home.

The next few days went smoothly, but he did feel like something was missing, that something being Pihu. One evening he went to check in her department, but she was just not there. He thought she might be away from her desk so he went to check a couple more times. And that's when it hit him.

Chapter 12 : She’s Gone

The papers in her hands that day, the look in her eyes, everything started to make sense. Her internship was not supposed to end till the end of the month, but it seemed like she had finished early and left the company. She had left without informing Hemant, his heart sunk a little, but there was no time to sob for him. He tried calling her, but her number was unreachable. His office timing was not supposed to end until another hour, but he just couldn't wait any longer. He took his bike and left for Pihu’s apartment. The only two thoughts that came to his mind during that long and tiring road, in the worst hours of the day in terms of traffic were what if she had left for the USA already and if she has, how can she leave without a goodbye. He drove as fast as he could. Upon reaching her place, he pressed the doorbell. The door opened and she stepped out. He had never been so happy to see her before. Pihu was stoked to see him outside her door, but she just couldn’t say a word, she was about to cry. Then Hemant with all his rage shouted

“I can't believe after everything we have been through I didn’t even deserve a goodbye..!”

That's when Pihu couldn't hold the tears any longer, she hugged Hemant with all her might and in a sobbing voice uttered “I am so sorry for everything Hemant.”

And suddenly Hemant wasn’t angry anymore. He said it was ok and put his arms around her, but Pihu was crying uncontrollably. After all she had not just broken his heart, but she had crushed it to pieces and her justification being his welfare. Yet here he was, holding her in his arms, trying his best to console her. Hemant took her inside the apartment, made her sit on the couch, brought her water, and was constantly rubbing her back and wiping the tears off her eyes. Once Pihu was in a state to talk, she started explaining to Hemant why she did what she did, but Hemant stopped her “You don’t have to”.

"Aren’t you angry?" Asked Pihu.

"Not anymore." Replied Hemant.

"Why? You didn’t deserve any of this."

"If you had not taken that offer and stayed here just because of me, I wouldn’t have been able to forgive myself. I can’t be the one standing between you and your dreams."

As upset as he was that Pihu was leaving soon, he wanted to make sure that Pihu carried with her only fond memories and nothing bitter. So he asked her if they could spend an entire day together for one last time and to his surprise she agreed, his happiness knew no bounds.

It was 7am in the morning. Hemant was already waiting outside Pihu's apartment that was in Koramangala. Hemant had just one thing in his mind, that was to collect so many memories with Pihu that even in her absence he could reminisce them. Pihu came out of her apartment in a jiffy. She looked like a dream walking towards him. She was wearing a pink top paired with white jeans. What was surprising was that even when she had picked jeans, she still wore those cute little jhumkas. Hemant almost had to take a moment to break himself from the trance, the reason being that he had fallen for her rather than what she looked like.

"So, where are we going first?" Pihu asked.

"Hop on, you will see soon enough" Hemant said and gave Pihu a helmet.

Their first stop was a cafe as neither of them had eaten anything and Hemant knew just how obsessed Pihu was with trying out new food outlets.

"Hole in the wall. I have heard a lot about this cafe. It's so close by, yet I never had the time. I'm glad we came here" said Pihu

Hemant smiled. He had done his research the previous day and had the plan well set for the special day. They ordered whatever fancied them and left the cafe with a happy tummy and a big smile. Seeing Pihu smile, Hemant knew that his hard-work had paid off.

Next he took her shopping, and for a change they didn't go to any mall or fancy huge shopping spots. He instead took her to commercial street, an extremely popular shopping arcade in Bangalore, which is always crowded irrespective of what day it is. Needless to say, Pihu was impressed.

They bought something in every shop that they visited. The shopkeepers had all varieties of beautiful clothes from traditional artefacts to modern day pieces. The more they walked, the more shops they came across and each of them having more beautiful items than the previous ones. Pihu was confused. At the end of their shopping sesh, she had so many covers that they had lost count of them. She had bought countless numbers of footwears, ear rings, tops and what not. She was smiling from one ear to the other.

Mission accomplished, said Hemant to himself.

After a lot of roaming around, they were starving. So he took her to a nearby restaurant that served north indian food. Luckily enough for both of them, they were non vegetarians. They ordered chicken kebab, tandoori roti, butter chicken and Biryani. It was the only time in their entire day where none of them spoke. They dug themselves in their plate and lifted their heads only when they were full. The food was scrumptious. They ordered an ice cream for the dessert and left the place.

"So you liked the food?" Asked Hemant once they were out of the restaurant

"Liked? I loved the food. It was delicious" said Pihu with a smile.

She stopped midway and continued

"Hemant, thank you for this day. It will be the most memorable day for me. I know all this will have taken a lot of effort and I don't know how else to say this to you, but thank you so much."

"Hey I didn't make the food" joked Hemant.

Pihu laughed and they headed towards the parking zone.

Once there Hemant asked Pihu to choose one of the two fingers. Pihu laughed at his childishness and chose one of them.

"Movie it is" said Hemant with a heavy voice like it was some announcement.

"What was the other one?" Asked Pihu with excitement

"Now I can't tell you that, let's go" said Hemant like he was a 3 year old kid and his life depended on that secret

They quickly made their way to Inox Lido to watch the movie. Pihu was eagerly waiting to watch the movie IT chapter two. How could Hemant forget anything that Pihu had so uninhibitedly mentioned. He remembered every detail about anything that came from her. It was rather difficult to judge if it was Hemant who was being more ignorant or Pihu. They were certainly aware of the effects these memories would have on them.

After the movie and a little bit of roaming around, it was 1A.M in the morning. Hemant and Pihu left for her apartment. Hemant was riding and Pihu was sitting as close to him as she could with her arms around his waist, they were savouring every moment as they may never come again. Pihu couldn’t contain her curiosity about their previous conversation about choosing one finger out of the two.

“Can I ask you a question?" Asked Pihu.

“Yes.” said Hemant.

"What was in that other finger?”

“If you really must know, I had planned a getaway to sakleshpur, we would sit beside river cauvery, look at the stars and just talk if we feel like it, we would recall everything we have been through in the past 5 months.”

Pihu hit Hemant on his shoulder and asked “this was the better plan. Why didn’t you tell me before?"

"Stop hitting me or else you will travel to the US with broken bones." Joked Hemant.

Pihu knew that sakleshpur is one of the most romantic getaways available in bangalore, so she kinda had an idea of what exactly Hemant had in mind. When they reached at her doorsteps, Pihu told Hemant that she would have really loved to go and just sit with him beside the river and then Hemant explained that with everything that

has happened to him in these past few weeks, he has learned that everything has its time and place. If it is supposed to happen it will happen even with our most valiant efforts to avoid it, if it's not supposed to it will never happen even if we put our best efforts. He came out of his plethora of thoughts and realised that it was too late.

"It's getting late, I should leave now” Hemant said this and turned around and started to walk away, but suddenly something hit Pihu and she grabbed his hand, pulled him towards her and gave him a soft kiss on his cheeks.

Hemant was confused as to what this was.

“Isn’t this what you wanted to happen?" asked Pihu, with his hands still in hers. They started looking straight into each other’s eyes. Hemant still was clueless what he should do next, but then Pihu nodded her head a little as to say “yes you can”. With this done they slowly started moving closer to each other, their lips in close proximity like never before, their thought process in vain and that's when their lips touched each other's for the first time.

Chapter 13 : Goodbye Pihu

Their lips brushed against each other's softly, delicately, like butterfly wings, long enough for them to inhale each other's breath. Hemant could feel the warmth of her skin and taste the cherry lipstick she was wearing that night. That moment was so soothing for both of them, in each other's arms, it almost felt like it was all they ever wanted. They just couldn't get enough of each other, it felt as if time had come to a standstill, but obviously it hadn't. That's when Hemant broke the embrace.

"Don't you have a flight to catch tomorrow..?"
"Yes." Said Pihu.
"Then don't you think you should sleep now?" Asked Hemant.
"I probably should." said Pihu, still in his arms.

It was 2A.M already when Hemant decided to leave. Pihu was aware that it would take him anywhere between 40-50 minutes to reach his home, and they already had had a really long day, so she suggested that he stayed back. Hemant gladly agreed and told Pihu that he would drop her at the airport.

Once inside Hemant jokingly said "Are we.."
Pihu stopped him at that very moment and said "No, don't get any fancy ideas mister."

They went to bed and spent the night in each other's warmth, her touch felt heavenly, calm and soothing. Hemant didn't want this night to end, as much as he prayed to all the gods, he knew it would. The sun still came up in the morning and they were up, Pihu still had some packing to finalize so the responsibility of breakfast fell straight on Hemant's shoulders. He cooked an omelette and served it with bread. It was delicious. Pihu with a devious smile said that if she only knew that he could cook so well, she would have said yes the first time he had proposed. Hemant gave her a taunting smile and said

that if she only had said yes, she would have found out so many other things he was good at. They both laughed and started making sure that all the packing was taken care of. This was not much of a problem as Pihu had the organizing skills of a 40 year old mother. They quickly ordered a cab for the airport, and started making sure that she had everything important with her.

Passport .. check
Ticket .. check
Wallet .. check
Phone .. check

They boarded the cab and left for the airport, they faced some traffic, but they had preplanned the journey and her flight didn't leave till 3pm. It would take them 150 minutes to reach the airport, so they started recalling their best memories in the cab.

"Do you remember how we first met." Asked Pihu.

"Yeah, it was funny how you mistook the operations department for the finance department, like how can someone as smart as you be so wrong." Said Hemant with a smirk.

"Yeah, but then I also became best friends with you, so I guess I have a knack of doing wrong things." Said Pihu with a devilish smile.

"Very funny, but seriously I can't imagine how I would have coped these last 5 months in the office if not for you."

"I know, I am quite special."

"Joke all you want now, from tomorrow I won't be there."

"How hard it must be for someone as beautiful as me to find a guy right?"

Watching Hemant getting pissed off, she held his hand and said, "I can't imagine how tough this would have been for me as well if you were not around. I will cherish every moment we have spent together, even our fights, especially our fights. How the hell did we manage to argue over such tiny things."

Hemant smiled and said "I am thankful that we did."

"Me too." Pihu added. After a brief moment Pihu spoke again.

"Do you remember the time we had a massive argument about that girl you were supposedly in love with. I thought we wouldn't be talking after that."

"Yeah I do. I had to take a huge sip of my ego to apologize to you, but this brings me to a question. If I wouldn't have apologized, would you?

"Nope. It wasn't my mistake, was it? How exactly did that work out for you, investing your time on that girl, huh?"

"Yeah i probably should have listened to you."

"You should be more considerate towards these decisions Hemant. I can only imagine how you will cope without me."

"Don't you worry about that, I have a couple of girls lined up, and then there's Shreya as well." Said Hemant playfully.

"Such a playboy you are, aren't you? Besides, Shreya is quite out of your league. Trust me on that."

"Weren't you out of my league, how did that work out?"

"There isn't anything between you two right..?" Asked Pihu worriedly.

"Hey, relax. I was kidding, she is not even a friend, just a colleague."

They were so engaged in the conversation that they didn't realize that they had reached the airport. They started walking towards the airport gate, and as much as Hemant wanted to hold Pihu's hands, he was holding her bags.

"So this is it then ..!" asked Hemant.

"Yes, this is where our roads split." Replied Pihu.

"Well, will they ever meet again?" asked Hemant.

"We will have to wait and see right?" said Pihu with a smile. Soon they reached the airport gate, and it was time for Pihu to depart. They wished each other best of luck and bid their goodbyes. As soon as Pihu was about to enter the gate, Hemant shouted,

"Pihu, last night, did it mean something?" Pihu turned around with teary eyes, still smiling, and nodded. And they waved goodbyes one last time. Pihu left for the USA and Hemant left for his home.

Chapter 14 : A storm in the Office

Pihu wanted to keep looking at Hemant until the distance was so much that it was practically impossible to see him. But she couldn't do that, her eyes welled up and everything was a blurred sight. She made her way towards the security area and left Hemant behind forever. Once into the waiting area, all she could do was think about him, how selflessly he had cared for her specially the last two days. He was everything that she had ever wanted yet there she was sitting and trying with every vein in her body to forget him and move on. She knew it would be a painful process for her to undo all the moments in her mind that had him, but she had made her decision.

She could hear announcements being made for boarding the flight. It was her cue and she got ready to board the flight. On entering the flight, she settled and started thinking about life that was waiting for her. She decided that once the flight took off there was no turning back, all she would think of will be of the new life and her dream job that was waiting to welcome her with open arms. Thought of her joining the dream job did excite her for a while and she was ecstatic, but then pain is more powerful than happiness and it had been hardly three hours that she had parted with her probable love of life.

It had been a few hours since she had boarded the flight and she fell asleep reading a magazine.

On his way from the airport to his apartment, Hemant was going through all the emotions. He couldn’t help but have a smile on his face. He had finally found the girl he had been longing for all this while. All he could think about was last night, the kiss and the way Pihu nodded when he asked if it meant something. He just couldn't get those moments out of his head. While all this was fun, he was also thinking about what the future had in store for him and Pihu. In his mind he was all analyzing all the possible scenarios.

“Will she come back to Banglore ? Can I move to the US? Fuck it, I will move, I will work hard and find a better job in the US, I hate this city anyway, after all what has this city ever offered me besides traffic.”

He reached his house and jumped straight to his bed. He had hardly slept for the last two days. He closed his eyes, but everything still felt like he had been dreaming with his eyes open. This is a common feeling for people in love for the first time. The flowers are blooming, the birds are chirping, the breeze is delightful, you can’t recall any of your problems and the world just feels like a better place. As unruffled as Hemant was in that moment, he kinda had a feeling that he was forgetting something, but he wouldn’t figure out what it was until next morning.

With Pihu gone, two days of Hemant’s life were gone as well, two days in which Hemant was supposed to show up at the office and work, two days in which he had done neither. He had taken a leave for a week just a few days ago, and on top of everything this time his leave was not informed as well, he was practically absent. It was finally time for Hemant to show up at the office. He had anticipated that his boss Monisha would be mad and he would be reprimanded, but he had no idea what was about to hit him.

As soon as he reached his office, he was called straight by Manisha to her office,

"Good Morning Manisha." Said Hemant.

"Good Morning Hemant, can you tell me why you were not in the office for the last two days?" Asked Manisha Sternly.

"Actually something urgent popped up and I also had to drop a friend to the airport yesterday."

"Did you feel like informing me about this at any point? You know so that I could have made adjustments and allocated resources in your absence."

"Sorry Manisha, this totally slipped my mind."

And that was when Manisha went nuclear and exploded, and Hemant took full force of that explosion face first. He had been

scolded a few times in the past, and had seen some people getting it from Manisha as well, but never like this. Never before had Manisha gone ballistic on someone. Hemant deserved a little ruffling, but he was getting kicked all around the park. After about 30 minutes of hairdryer session Manisha was done, and asked Hemant to leave and not to make mistakes like this in the future. Hemant said sure and left. He was a little confused and visibly upset.

He was working on something when Shreya popped up. It had become Shreya's routine to check on Hemant once in a while everyday. Though she knew she was working with Rishi and Hemant had not much work to offer, she would make sure she talked to him every single day of the week.

"I am fine, how about you?" asked Hemant in a lower register.

"I am good, you seem upset, what's the matter?" asked Shreya.

"Manisha was really mad at me as I was unavailable for the last two days and didn't make it to the office." Said Hemant, almost regretting his mistake.

"And why is that you were not in the office and unavailable? Where were you?" asked Shreya.

"I was with Pihu, it was her last day here before she left. So, we decided to spend some time together." Hemant said with a slight smile.

"With Pihu? The girl that broke your heart? Forgive me if I sound rude, but believe me you should not spend a single moment more thinking of her or being with her. I have seen the kind of effect she has on you and it's not beneficial or of any good in any way. All I'm trying to say is no matter how good she is, she isn't meant for you and you must stop…" Shreya said and was still not done when Hemant cut her off.

As pissed off as Hemant was, this took his anger to a whole new level, and it showed in the words that came out of his mouth next.

"Who do you think you are, huh? Just because you have seen me at my weakest point once, does this give you the right to advise me about my life choices? No, let me make it clear to you. I will do

whatever I want, you don't control me and you never will, we all have a place in each other’s lives and in mine, you are just a colleague. I would be really thankful if you keep that in mind and treat me like a colleague from this point on. I hope I have drawn a line visible enough, feel free to not cross it again. You can leave now, I have some work to take care of ." Hemant said and he didn't have an iota of guilt. Shreya left Hemant's cabin teary eyed and that did not move Hemant even a little.

Isn’t this exactly what happens, when we love someone? We really can’t stand a word said against them, the same happened with Hemant. Someone pointed a finger at Pihu and Hemant chose a course of action that he would regret later, as had been the theme for most of his life. He finished his work and left for his apartment. Later that night something unexpected happened, Hemant’s phone rang and it was none other than his boss Manisha. He thought about all the possible mistakes he could have made in the last ten hours. He Picked up the call and to his surprise Manisha had called to apologize for the morning. He was shocked, like how often does this happen that your boss apologizes to you, but her voice didn’t seem right so Hemant asked if everything was alright. Manisha took a pause and then said about the management's decision of replacing her with a new manager. Hemant couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

Chapter 15 : Pihu in a new country

"Manisha why are they replacing you? You have been doing such a wonderful job here." Asked Hemant. "Sometimes it doesn't matter how good of a job you are doing. This is an order straight from the clients. In the near future the pressure is only going to increase on our team, and they want someone with a better resume at least on paper to lead the team." Said Manisha. Hemant could sense her voice go low.

"But we have been delivering results better than expected. We have been meeting all the performance metrics, they should not be doing this to you." Argued Hemant.

"It is what it is Hemant" Said Manisha

"Well aren't you gonna do something about it?" asked Hemant.

"Believe me, I do not want to lose this job now. I love working with you guys, but since this order is straight from the clients we can't do anything about it. After all they are the ones providing us with business. Also one more thing Hemant, I didn't want to go so hard on you, but this news was just confirmed last night in the senior management meeting and I vented all my frustration on you, I am so sorry for that." Said Manisha apologetically.

"You don't need to be sorry Manisha. I have looked up to you since the day I joined this company, and you only went hard on me because I made a mistake. I will miss you a lot when you are gone." Said Hemant.

"That's so sweet of you, and thanks for understanding. I am gonna go now, bye." Said Manisha and hung up the call.

After a fair twenty two hours Pihu was in New York, popularly known as 'The Empire State'. She couldn't contain her smile as she quickly got out of the airport. All the arrangements relating to her accomodation were taken care of by her company for a few days until she looked for one herself. She did not waste another minute and got into a taxi and went to her place. It is one thing to dream and another to be living that dream. Well Pihu had always been a person

that excelled in whatever field she put her foot into. She was so used to being good at what she did that taking new challenges hardly scared her anymore. She was far from being intimidated by anything that was related to her work. She had decided that she was here to stand out of the crowd and make herself noticed.

She had two days of time in her hand before she joined and she wanted to make the most of it. Though she was alone, she enjoyed every moment and revelled in it. It was as though everything that happened in India existed only there and it had nothing to do with her anymore. She roamed the streets of New York, relished the kind of food that the city was known for and came back to her hotel with the memory of the day filled with fun and quintessential life that she was to have for the next few years there. After getting back in her pyjamas and having her dinner she noticed there were texts on her Whatsapp from Hemant, that was a dull moment for her as she recollected what had happened between the two of them. She immediately replied to him.

H - Hey, call me once you get access to WiFi.
P - Hey i have reached, but today has just been so overwhelming and its night time here so it must be early morning there, I will call you tomorrow.

Even though it was early morning in India, Hemant was still waiting for Pihu to call her. He had been up all night for a call that never came. It was understandable with the long trip and the new town, but this deflated Hemant a little, he replied “okay sure, whenever you get time :))” and went to bed. There were so many things that Hemant wanted to talk about with Pihu, the incidents with Manisha and Shreya. How she was finding the town, the people, everything, but all this had to wait.

Chapter 16 : Stigma and the new Manager

Pihu still had a day's time with her before she was supposed to join and she had nothing major to do since most of the arrangements were already taken care of by her employers so she decided to explore the town, after all it is the most happening town in the world. Their central park, empire state building, statue of liberty, the list is never ending really. Pihu decided she would go to as many places as possible and she had to start early in the morning. Amidst all this she forgot that she was supposed to call Hemant in the morning and went on her travel spree.

Another day passed and Hemant still didn’t receive a call or a text from Pihu, and he was upset because of this, but it was his fault really that he was expecting things to remain the same at least with Pihu. It was almost surprising that after everything he had been through as a kid, a teenager, a working adult, he still didn’t learn that change is inevitable and this tough realization was just starting. He decided to break his silence and he called Pihu, but she didn’t pick up, so he dropped a text saying that she was supposed to call him today and he wanted to tell her something regarding Manisha.

Now Manisha was one of those characters whom everyone looked up to, she was 27 and had started out like any of us, but her leadership qualities were evident from day one. She had worked really hard to get to where she was, she was a boss in every sense of the word. She knew how to run a team and how to get the work done despite the situation. She also was someone who would fight tooth and nail for her people, even when someone had made a blunder, she would take all the heat from the senior management and advise the team on how these kind of mistakes can be avoided from the next time. Everybody really missed Manisha when she left.

Now as to why she had to leave, there are two words; stigma and politics that you need to understand. Manisha was about to be married in the coming months. Rakesh who was the manager of the engineering team, and had eyed her position for a while now, saw this as a perfect opportunity to convince the senior management that after her marriage, she would not be able to lead the team to her best abilities as she would have to split her attention between her new family and work. Rakesh already had connections in the senior management and it was relatively easy to convince the rest of them as there was no female on the table. It was an unanimous decision that they are going to pay her the severance package and relieve her of her duties.

Did the loss of this job affect Manisha? Yes, she really loved her team. After all, this team she had built on her own from scratch, this team was only a year old. She had interviewed and hired each one of them personally.

Did the loss really affect Manisha? No, She already has 3 job offers on the plate, all from better companies when she left.

She ended up joining a multinational company far better and bigger than the last company, not as a manager, but with her skills it would take very little time before she was made into one. Nevertheless, what happened with her was still wrong on various levels and the people involved faced actions in the future, but let's not skip too ahead of time.

The announcement was made official in the coming weeks. Manisha was no longer our manager, Rakesh was and this had a pretty devastating impact on the team's morale. To make a good first impression, Rakesh took the team to a 4 star restaurant. They were free to order anything they wanted and there was an open bar as well. Surely enough the money was not coming out of Rakesh’s pocket, it was paid by the company. The food was amazing, but the guy buying it for us was not. Rakesh didn’t exactly have a glittering reputation among the workers. The people in his team complained about how much pressure he put on them, the constant screaming

which made the veins in his head pop out and many more, but the most disturbing one among them was his treatment of the female members. There were rumours that he had mentally harassed multiple female employees in the past, but no one came out as he had threatened them that they would lose their job. The environment in and around our office was about to change, only time would tell how everyone coped.

Chapter 17 : Opening up

It was finally the weekend after an excessively eventful week. A week that saw Hemant finally getting the love he wanted, Hemant having to say bye to that love, Hemant getting the scolding of his life and Hemant going full Hemant on Shreya, his boss being fired from the job, him getting a new boss. There was a lot going through his head, but he did not have anyone to talk to about this. The subset of people he did know and he had opened up to previously was relatively small. It had Pihu and Shreya and that's it. He was not entirely sure what his equation with Pihu was anymore, and Shreya, he would be baffled if she would even look at him again let alone talking. He did try to call Pihu, but she did not pick up, and then he turned to someone whom he had never opened up to before, His mom.

His mom lived just across the town. She was the proud owner and founder of Mamta's bakery which had 4 outlets across the town, all of them running at full capacity and plans for further expansion were underway. She had built this business from the ground up. She was always a very strong woman with unshakable will power. When she got separated from Hemant’s dad, she had refused to take any alimony. With the savings she had managed and a small loan from the bank, she opened up a small shop where she would bake mouth watering cakes, puffs, muffins, pastries, and other confectionery. The initial three months were full of struggle, but then people started spreading the word. The shop’s popularity increased and the business took off. There were some setbacks along the way, but she never looked back. There was a time she didn’t have a job, now she was employing 40 plus people.

Hemant’s mom was one heck of a role model for him, but somewhere in his mind, he had this idea that he would never be able to reach the level of success that his mother had managed to. He had thought that he would never make her proud and because he

wanted to be as strong as her, he never talked about anything he was going through in his life. Whenever she asked him if everything was fine whether on call or when he visited her, he would say yes with a straight face that would deceive anyone, even when he was fighting battles in his head. He was a little intimidated by her personality all his life, so much so that he had almost forgotten she was his mother and he could always talk to her about his troubles and ask for her advice, after all she must have been through all this and a lot more herself at various points of her life.

He had informed his mother that he would be visiting this weekend and so he did after an eighty minute ride. Yes they lived in the same town, but Hemant's office and his Mom's house were on two different ends of the city, the back and forth daily would have been very hectic. That is why Hemant had rented an apartment close to his office, but he visited his Mom once a month for the weekend. His mother was as happy as always to see him. Whenever he would visit, his mother would be waiting with his favourite dishes on the table. Likewise this time as well, she had made his favourite chicken burger and muffins and after they had their fill. They started to talk.

"So, how has my favorite son been doing?" Asked Hemant's mom.

"Not great mom, this week has been very hectic to say the least." Replied Hemant.

"Is it work?"

"Yes, It's work, actually you remember my boss Manisha right, she was fired by our company for no reason."

"That's an awful news."

"You know, all of us at the office really loved working under her."

"So, is it decided who is going to be your manager next?"

"Yes, it's one of the managers from another team, but his reputation is not that great." Said Hemant with a frown.

"It's just life beta, you will come across all kinds of people, not all of them will be good for you, you will just have to look for the right ones."

"Since we are talking about people, there is someone I want you to know about. There is this girl."

"Oh! Who is she?" Asked his mom with a thrilled voice.

"There's this girl I really like and she likes me as well, Pihu. We worked in the same company, but she had to move to the US this week and we were on great terms when she left, but only after a couple of days everything feels so different. It's almost like there was never something between us. It just isn't the same anymore, she has been avoiding my calls and messages and I have been attempting to do the same, I am not sure what to do."

"If you two like each other so much then why are you avoiding each other..?"

"I guess she is just busy with her new life and I don't want to bug her."

"I can't really comment on her. I don't know her, do I? But what I have seen in life is that people often end up confusing different things for love. Maybe it is just that the thought of losing them in their current capacity gets to their head and then they promise commitment to hold on to them, but this is not love, is this what happened with you both?"

"Did you go to some wizarding school or something." Asked Hemant jocularly.

"No." She replied with a smile.

"So, what should I do about this?"

"Try calling her once again if she really means so much to you. Yes, it's office time in America, but if you mean as much to her she will definitely call back."

"What if she doesn't?"

"She's not the one."

Chapter 18 : Rakesh is a Monster

The weekend was up, and it was Rakesh's first day in charge. There was a visible tension on everybody's face. The entire team was worried. They weren't apprehensive but sure that Rakesh's entry into the team would only bring in problems and performance issues. Manisha was a perfect boss more so because she knew the mindset of every employee working under her and developed the kind of rapport required. On the contrary, Rakesh was a complete chauvinist and it was intelligible by the way he had behaved with his fellow female employees. He was a strong believer of the fact that women are well suited for nothing but being at home. It was because of his close relations with the senior management that he had gotten away with all the nasty remarks he had made in the past and that had only encouraged his reckless behaviour and easy targeting of women. Though there were several instances where he had managed to pull of an incompetent team or an almost dysfunctional team to a level nobody could imagine, yet it couldn't suffice for the number of hard days he had given his employees. Everybody in the office had heard the tales of his intolerance and hence the tensed atmosphere.

Today was his first official meeting with the entire team and they were all equally anxious. Some of them had convinced themselves to turn a deaf ear to all the stories they had heard and they were seen smiling, but nobody knew just how long they would smile. Shreya was still new in the team and still getting familiar, under Manisha she was allowed not to attend the meetings until further notice. Manisha didn’t want to bother her until she was ready to work, so she didn’t join Rakesh’s meeting as well. The meeting went on for about 45 minutes. While some people told him the status of where the current work stood, he told some other people about the change in the agenda. After the entire discussion was over, they left the conference room and went to their seats. After about 10 mins, Rakesh went to a guy named Naman and asked about Shreya.

Naman wasn't very much aware of what she had been working on, but he definitely knew where he could find her and so he went and informed her regarding the same.

After about 10 minutes, Shreya went to his cabin. "May I come in, Rakesh?" Asked Shreya.

"Yes Miss Shreya, please come in." Said Rakesh with a smirk.

"I heard from Naman that you asked for me"

"Oh! Yes, why weren't you in today's meeting?" Asked Rakesh.

"That's because I thought this meeting is for the senior guys and under Manisha I was not supposed to join any meetings. So I didn't join the meeting."

"And are you still working under Manisha?" Asked Rakesh with a smile that was as unpleasant as his behaviour.

Shreya knew this wasn't going to be a great conversation. She almost feared opening her mouth at that point, but it wasn't school anymore where she would be forgiven for not talking.

"No ..!"

"Exactly Miss Shreya, now you are working under me. You were not in the meeting and hence I will have to explain the new roles again to you. Since this is the first time you are making a mistake, I will take an exception, but I don’t particularly like people who waste my time and the next time you make a mistake this conversation won't be this pleasant" said Rakesh and continued

"Your day starts now and you will finish all the work I assign and then leave. Is that understood?" Asked Rakesh

"Yes sure." Said Shreya with a feeble voice.

“One more thing miss Shreya, please go back to working with Hemant, since Rishi is one of the senior guys in the team, he has more important things to take care of”

She came out of his cabin and directly went to Rishi's desk to inform him about the changes. Rishi noticed that there was something off about Shreya as he saw her walk towards him.

"What's the matter?" Rishi asked with concern.

"Rakesh has asked me to join Hemant and he has assigned me some work and I'm supposed to finish it today," Said Shreya.

"You're leaving now?" Asked Rishi surprised.

"Yeah that's what I'm told to do." Said Shreya.

"Okay. Good luck. If anything I am always here."

As upset as Shreya was because of Rakesh's behaviour, there was somebody who was more sad. It was Rishi. He wanted Shreya to work with him. It was fun having her around. If it had not been an impromptu decision, he would have been fine because he would have known, but at that moment all he just wished was for Shreya to not be another of Rakesh's prey.

Shreya went back to her seat and checked her watch, it was 1pm. The kind of work Rakesh had assigned her, it was impossible for Shreya to complete it by evening. Besides the work, she was getting more and more paranoid thinking if she was his new target. She regretted not attending the meeting, but the deed was done and there was no going back, so she started off with her work. It was 6pm and the office started to feel emptier. Hemant who was leaving the office around the same time noticed Shreya working with absolute concentration. Usually by that time he used to find Shreya and Rishi in the parking lot, but today she was working and there was no Rishi around her. He felt like going and talking to her, but he refrained himself from doing so and went home.

It was almost 10pm when Shreya finally finished her work. The day had been really long. Priyam had been calling her incessantly. She was worried for all obvious reasons. It was late and it would be really hard to find a taxi and traveling alone was no longer a safe option. Yet Shreya had told Priyam that there were people in the office and normally people traveled at that hour though there were hardly a dozen people in the entire building. She booked a cab and started moving towards the basement.

While on one hand Shreya had had a busy day, Hemant at his home was just loitering around in the garden contemplating whether or not he should call Shreya. He had picked up his phone at least 5

times only to put it back in the pocket again. His quick footsteps matched his level of restlessness. Of course he did not realise that, but it was quite evident. He thought for one final time and just dialled her number.

"Hello, yeah Hemant tell me? Is there any problem?" Asked Shreya

"Uh no there is no problem and I..... called to ask if whatever was assigned to you is done?" Replied Hemant and felt dumb about it the next moment.

"Yeah it's done and I've mailed Rakesh the copy. Did he say something?" Asked Shreya cluelessly.

"No, he didn't tell me anything. I just saw you working when I was leaving."

"Ahhh yeah I completed it just now and I'm leaving. If Rakesh asks you something, tell him I've completed the work."

"You are still in the office?" Asked Hemant puzzled.

"Yeah I'm leaving now." Replied Shreya.

"I'll be there in 20 minutes. Don't go by taxi, it's not safe. See you" said Hemant and cut the call.

Though Shreya felt absolutely blissful, she hated how he did not wait for her to respond. It was as though he did not bother what she wanted, but she pushed it at the back of her mind because she had something pleasant to think of. She cancelled her cab and waited patiently for Hemant to arrive. She was seeing minute changes in him. A few days ago, he was this mean person who didn't have any courtesy and care for anybody, but now he was coming there to pick her up because it was late and she was alone. It was absurd, but a good thing for sure.

Almost after a long wait of 25 mins, Hemant arrived. He had come in his mom's car. He quickly opened the front door for her to get in. Shreya was delighted and confused. She definitely couldn't take it when Hemant behaved rude, but it was getting hard for her to accept his sweet behaviour as well. She had no idea why he was here, what he had in his mind or if he had had another conversation

or a fight with Pihu and he wanted somebody to share it with. She just decided to take everything as it comes.

Chapter 19 : The new stakes

They reached her apartment, Shreya got off and Hemant immediately apologized.

“Shreya I am sorry for the way I spoke to you earlier” said Hemant

“It’s ok, I should not have commented on your personal matters like that and thanks for dropping me” Shreya replied.

“So I guess Rakesh has asked you to work with me again”

“Yeah”

“Cool I’ll see you tomorrow then?”

“Bye.” said Shreya.

“Bye.”

He stood there for a moment or more wanting to talk something more, but decided otherwise and left. Usually when you start to have feelings, you tend to overthink everything related to that one person. Shreya went inside the apartment and the only thought crossing her mind was the fact that Hemant had apologized to her. Though all her answers to Hemant were extremely on point, she was extremely pleased and happy. Quite obviously she was worried about Hemant after seeing him react like that the other day, but it was more so because she was starting to care about the equation they shared.

Hemant on his way back home tried calling Pihu, there was no reply. He messaged her, but he knew there was no point in waiting. He was sure he would receive a reply but after how long, he wasn't certain about that. He waited online for a min or two for her reply, but there was no response. He felt sad thinking how suddenly he stopped being even a friend in her life. Just a while ago she was there with him, sharing every moment before she left, but now he was knocking on a door that was closed, perhaps forever.

The next day in the office, the atmosphere was more serious than the past few days. People were not laughing, cracking jokes, chatting like they used to. Everyone was head to toe immersed in

their work. The office had started to feel like a completely different place since Manisha had left. As soon as Shreya reached the office, Rishi informed her that Rakesh has called a meeting at 3 and everyone is supposed to join, he had some very important announcements to make.

Shreya told “thank you so much Rishi, if I had missed this meeting Rakesh would have eaten me alive.”

“No worries, but make sure you join this is pretty serious.” Rishi said.

The clock struck 3 and Shreya was one of the firsts to come to the conference room. Soon everyone joined and Rakesh came as well.

“So, I can see that everyone is here. Is Shreya here?” Asked Rakesh.

"Yes” replied Shreya .

“Well I thought you were going to miss this one as well.”

This was an embarrassing moment for Shreya, she could see two to three smiling faces. Hemant did not approve of this behavior that Rakesh put forth towards Shreya. He glanced at Shreya to see if she was okay, but she wasn’t and there wasn’t much he could do about it at that point, hence he let it go.

Rakesh addressed the word of the day.

“So this meeting has been called to inform you about some very important changes happening at our client’s side and on our side as well. There is a new majority stake owner in our clients business and they would be taking control now. In simple terms we have new clients to deal with our existing business. I had a meeting with them yesterday and they are planning to give us a new project to add over our existing portfolio. In this team we already have the people familiar with those technologies, so the onboarding for the new project should be relatively smooth. We will need people on this project 24*7 and since it is very critical to their business, they won't

tolerate any human errors, and we will be answerable straight to them. This project is coming with a pretty tight agreement as well, if they incur any business impact on this project due to any blunder from our end, it will have a straight impact on our revenue from this project. We will start onboarding this project after the diwali break. So I think all of us have something significant to celebrate now, does anyone have any questions or concerns they would like to highlight?"

Everyone looked really excited about the project, but Rishi noticed the obvious flaw in this plan and brought up the question.

“The new project sounds really cool and the prospect is really exciting, but are we going to increase our headcount if we are going to be working on two projects simultaneously now and that too 24*7?”

“No Rishi, we are not looking for new recruits as of now, we will have to make do with what we have” replied Rakesh.

“But everyone here already has their hand full with this project alone, if we add another project of that criticality to the mix then that would be overcommitting the resources we have” argued Rishi.

“I am afraid then Rishi, we don't share the same opinion about the existing workload on this team. I personally think that the resources we have are getting underutilized and the senior management feels the same way, hence we decided for this team to handle the project in the first place.” said Rakesh, and continued “and on the same note, if anyone who feels like they are working more than what they are being paid for, please get in touch with me and we can discuss their competency levels with human resources. On this note this meeting is over, everyone get back to your work.”

After the meeting Rishi was quite upset over how his comments were handled by Rakesh, he didn’t even realize when Shreya came to his cubicle.

“Hey, what are you thinking about so deeply?” asked Shreya

“Hey Shreya, nothing it’s just that this new project will increase the workload on all of us significantly, and we already have too much

on our plate” said Rishi

“But that doesn’t happen till after diwali, so chill. Besides I was ridiculed by Rakesh today and if I can be fine, you definitely can be.” said Shreya with a smile.

“I guess we can, for now” replied Rishi.

“Do you have any plans for this diwali ?” asked Shreya. No, not yet” “Ok then great, why don’t you join me and Priyam at our hometown to celebrate then, I am also planning to ask Hemant, it will be fun, please don't say no …!” said Shreya making a puppy face that was too cute to be said no to. “Ok sure I will join you guys” Said Rishi. “Cool, we are going to have so much fun.” said Shreya, almost jumping with excitement.

Rishi felt as happy as he had never been. He was going to Shreya's place for the weekend. He couldn't have asked for a better way to get over all the incidents of the week. The most amazing thing about this would be that he would get to see her even on the weekends. Suddenly the day wasn't that bad for him.

Hemant went back to his place after the meeting and noticed that Pihu had replied, he messaged her immediately and asked how it had been there in the US and how she was, they talked for a while until she stopped replying. Hemant smiled at it and put his phone aside. He knew the kind of a person Pihu was and she hadn't changed.

Priyam and Shreya had been planning this for some days now, all that was left was to ask Hemant if he would join. Whilst in the office Shreya didn’t get the time to ask Hemant, as they were both busy working. When it was time for them to leave, Shreya almost ran to him and asked if he had any plans for this Diwali and if he would like to join them. Now Hemant was not a very social guy, he was the exact opposite. He hadn’t celebrated any festivals with friends as he didn’t have any. It was always him and his mother, but this time, he wanted to celebrate it with Shreya and the others. It would have been a new experience for him, and he also wanted to say yes because somewhere he still felt sorry for talking to her like he did

about Pihu. While he stood calculating and thinking to himself, Shreya noticed the confusion on his face and asked him to take time and tell her later.

As soon as Hemant reached his apartment he called his mom to ask if she was ok if he spent this diwali with his friends from office. This came as a pleasant surprise to his mom that he had started investing into friendships, so she happily agreed and then Hemant immediately called Shreya and informed her that he will be joining them for Diwali.

Once the call was disconnected, Shreya told Priyam that both Rishi and Hemant had agreed. The plan was finally on. They were all going to Shreya's place for Diwali.

Chapter 20 : A journey to remember

We all know how diwali holidays are the most remembered and beautiful days of our childhood. While some of us loved bursting crackers, some of us waited to steal the sweets before the puja even began. While for a whole lot of us it was about getting dressed and clicking family pictures, for some of them it was just returning to their families. In every way this festival bound together the families that either lived in different parts of the country or in different rooms of the house.

Luckily enough this time Diwali was on a Friday. It meant a long weekend and most people working or studying in different cities away from their families would get to visit their hometowns. Shreya and Priyam had not been home ever since they had joined their firms at Bangalore and their excitement had reached the skies. Shreya had packed her stuff almost a week ago and had only essentials to pack. She was more excited because this time Rishi and Hemant, both had agreed to join her and had already booked their tickets along with Shreya and Priyam for Thursday night.

It was almost 2pm on Thursday when they all left the office and decided to leave for the railway station at around 5pm. They had all booked the same compartment for a hassle free journey. Shreya was almost sure that the four of them would hardly talk throughout their journey, yet she had apparently carried some games to play. They all reached the station on time and waited for the train to arrive. Meanwhile Rishi went and got some chips, water bottles and cold drinks from a nearby vendor. The train was delayed by 10 minutes. It was initially awkward for Hemant as he had not been anywhere with friends in the last couple of years, but eventually after Shreya introduced Hemant to Priyam, the small talks began that ended as a fun filled conversation. The train arrived. They carefully took all the luggage inside and searched for their compartment. While Shreya helped Rishi stuff all the luggage beneath the lower berth, Hemant

helped Priyam pass them. They settled in about 5 minutes and the train left shortly afterwards. Shreya was still surprised she had successfully pulled off this seemingly impossible plan. She was happy, she was going home.

Hemant had carried some books to read during the journey. It was expected of him, but to his surprise Rishi snatched the book and closed it. Well he was Rishi, he could definitely do that. After all besides Pihu and his boss, Rishi was the only guy he had maintained good equations with. Rishi declared that nobody would do anything throughout the journey that did not involve the other three of course except peeing. Shreya knew this was the moment to disclose about the games she had carried. Everybody was in awe of how Shreya had made the best decision of carrying the games. Although it took them a while to decide on what game they wanted to play. They settled for ludo.

After almost four rounds of playing the game and Rishi not winning a single one of them, it was 12am and they decided to call it a night. Hemant and Priyam went for the upper berths and Shreya and Rishi took the lower berths. It was a 2 tier AC compartment so they had no outsider to disturb them. Shreya had been extremely happy about how the day had ended. She wasn't expecting this level of cooperation from Hemant's side, but was absolutely delighted however to have it. Shreya was almost falling asleep when Rishi called her.

"Shreya. Psssst psssst. Hey Shreya" Rishi whispered loudly enough for only Shreya to hear.

"What? Why are we talking so slowly?" Asked Shreya.

"You cheated, didn't you? That's why I lost all the games." Rishi said again in a whisper.

"You wish. You aren't as good a player as I am. It's okay you'll get better being with me" replied Shreya with a grin.

"Hahaha. Goodnight"

"Goodnight"

Rishi looked at her. She looked absolutely adorable in her sleep. The more they spent time together, the more he felt for her. He was confused until some days about his feelings for her, but now he was sure he liked her. He wanted her to be the first one to know about his feelings, but above everything, he wished she felt the same for him. His thoughts that night knew no bounds, he went from thinking about how he would tell her to how they would be together forever. Gradually he fell asleep. Priyam and Shreya were the first ones to wake up. They freshened up and later woke the boys up. There was still time for them to reach. A tea vendor passed by and Rishi called him for 4 cups of tea.

"At least go brush." Said Shreya.

"It's time for my bed tea. Shush all of you." Said Rishi and took a big sip of his tea with a loud slurp.

"Ewwww." Reacted the rest three together and later started to laugh. Hemant had almost stopped being the Hemant that he was. Shreya was looking at him when he was laughing, it felt as though he had been hiding all of this within him. From being so aloof to now traveling to somebody's home, he had started to change for the better. Shreya absolutely adored this change of his. With each passing day, she was starting to have something stronger for him. She wasn't as yet aware of it, but it was happening.

It was a journey to be remembered. They all reached at around 8am. Shreya's dad was there to pick everybody up. Shreya went and hugged her dad the moment she saw him. Everybody else greeted him and Rishi helped Mr. Verma load the luggage. Throughout the journey Mr. Verma asked all of them about their working experience and their families. It took about 30 minutes to reach Shreya's house. After dropping off Rishi, Hemant and Shreya, Mr. Verma went ahead and dropped Priyam at her place and invited everybody for the puja.

Chapter 21 : Diwali Holidays

Rishi, Hemant and Shreya made their way into the house where Mrs. Verma was decorating the place with flowers and rangoli. Shreya ran and hugged her mother. It had been a while since they had seen each other and like the usual ritual, Mrs. Verma started complaining about how lean Shreya had grown and how she looked pale. They both were so engrossed in their conversation that they completely forgot about Rishi and Hemant for a while. Rishi and Hemant didn't have any complaints though, they understood what it was to stay away from the family. After a good 10 minutes of mother daughter sequence did they finally realise that Rishi and Hemant were standing there holding their luggage clueless about what to do next. Mrs. Verma then warmly welcomed them and showed them to their room and asked them to freshen up and come downstairs for breakfast.

Rishi and Hemant quickly got ready and came downstairs. They were served hot parathas loaded with butter.

"Aunty aap itna butter dalogi toh hum double seat ho jayenge (Aunty, if you add so much butter in our paranthas, we will definitely become double seat)" joked Rishi.

"Arre beta wahi toh plan hai (arre beta that is the plan)" replied Mrs. Verma and they all laughed at it.

After their breakfast, both Rishi and Hemant went back to their room and rested for a while as it had been a long journey and they felt really worn out. After a while, Priyam and her parents came home along with Mr. Verma. The house was filled with people just like any other house usually is during any festival in India. Like Shreya and Priyam, even their families shared a great bond. They always invited each other over for dinner, parties and the kind of get togethers. Rishi and Hemant were the only ones left to join. Though they hadn't really fallen asleep, being on bed for a while felt good and they quickly decided to change and join everybody else. By the

time they got downstairs, both the families were having friendly banter amongst themselves. Rishi had picked a royal blue kurta along with a pair of white trousers and Hemant had picked a yellow kurta paired with white trousers. Though it was Diwali, Shreya hadn't expected them to come so well prepared, she was stunned. Both the guys looked handsome to say the least. As they came and joined, Mrs. Verma made sure she mentioned how great they looked, they were smiling all day after that.

Shreya and Priyam quickly changed for the puja and when they came out, everybody knew how dead drop gorgeous they looked. Shreya had donned a grey saree along with a pair of huge earrings that almost touched her shoulders, she had put on a dozen bangles on her right hand leaving the left bare. All the eye work clearly made the difference because in whatever direction she looked people lost their hearts. Rishi quickly went from being chatty to just being lost in her eyes. He only had one wish for that day, he didn't want anybody to notice how he had lost his heart. Priyam on the other hand wore a pastel saree and jhumkas. She had worn a huge bracelet and minimal make up. While Shreya had her hair tied into a bun, Priyam had let them loose.

In all this chaos, Shreya was impulsively looking at Hemant after every joke or conversation that was even slightly relevant to him. She had by now become an expert at looking at someone without anybody else even having the slightest hint of it. She loved how he had become a part of her family's celebration. She loved how he had taken care of wearing the right clothes and was trying to talk to everybody. For somebody who had known Hemant as a guy with no friends and rude, this transformation would come as a total shocker.

Everybody was told to gather around for the puja. It lasted for about 25 minutes and all this while Rishi was stuck at Shreya and Shreya was busy making deals through her prayers asking God to make everything easier once she went back to Bangalore. Shortly after the puja, everybody went to have their lunch. The arrangements were indeed on point for the lunch. Banana leaves,

sweets and savouries and a lot of ghee of course along with other dishes. Rishi insisted on serving everybody the food and Mrs. Verma adored him for that. More than lunch that day everybody enjoyed the company. They laughed, teased and argued over every petty matter. Finally Shreya and Rishi were the ones left for lunch. Everybody else moved to the other room and made themselves comfortable and started watching videos and pictures of Shreya and her childhood.

Rishi and Shreya hurriedly finished their lunch and when they were leaving the dining room, Rishi called out Shreya.

"Hey listen." Said Rishi
"Yeah?" Asked Shreya.
"Well I think there's something wrong with your hair." Said Rishi almost unsure if he should've said that.
"Oh I'll fix it right away, thanks." Said Shreya and was almost rushing towards her room when Rishi stopped her.
"I can help you." Rishi said and removed the clip off Shreya's hair.
"You look wonderful now." Rishi said and smiled. Shreya smiled in response to it and they made their way to the room.

The entire time after that was spent in taking a gazillion pictures in all kinds of poses and places. After almost a 1000 pictures and 'tired of smiling for pictures' faces, Priyam and her parents left. Everybody else as well went back to their rooms to change into something comfortable. Once Shreya was into her room, she started thinking about what had happened earlier, the entire Rishi scenario. She wondered almost for a second if it meant something, but immediately brushed it off after all she had something of higher priority to think of, Hemant. The thoughts of how he adjusted amongst so many people, how he looked extremely cute in traditional clothes completely took over her and she blushed.

And in the other room Hemant who was happy inside out now knew the importance of every moment. He had never experienced the completeness of a family. The whole day must've been just another day filled with laughter for everybody else, but for him, it had

been a day that he had shed all his insecurities and had made himself visible to everybody just as he was. Though he wasn't involving himself into a lot of conversations, he lowkey wanted the day to be the longest possible. Then he realised the reason for all this, Shreya. He wanted to thank her for this feeling that he was filled with. He kept waiting for a chance and he did get one.

Chapter 22 : A conversation

After savouring every bite of food that Shreya's mom had served in the night, everybody talked for a while in the Veranda and went to their rooms as they were very tired. After about 10 minutes of falling on the bed Rishi fell asleep, but Hemant was awake. The day was filled with a lot of fun, pictures and selfies, nice home food and lights. Hemant had started to enjoy the company of these people and he had great regards and warmth for Shreya's parents who so lovingly had taken care of them. He was twisting and turning on his bed when he heard his phone buzz. It was an Instagram notification. Shreya had posted a picture of all of them and had tagged everybody. Hemant checked the time, it was 11:30pm. It seemed as though even Shreya had trouble falling asleep. By now Hemant was familiar with the map of the house. He thought it's better to go have a nice walk in the garden rather than twirling on the bed. Without disturbing Rishi, he slowly unlatched the door and came out of the room and walked downstairs that led to the dining area at the end of which there was a door to the Veranda. From the Veranda space there were stairs directly to the garden. He saw that the door to the Veranda was open and walked towards it. On reaching there he saw Shreya sitting on the lawn watching the stars. For once he was happy to see Shreya awake. He quietly went and stood near her. Shreya wasn't expecting anybody around at that hour so Hemant's sudden arrival startled her a bit.

"Oh! It's you." Said Shreya with a tone of surprise.

"Yeah were you expecting somebody else?" Asked Hemant.

"No the thing is that I wasn't expecting anybody." Said Shreya and moments later tapped on the floor asking Hemant to join. He joined gladly.

"You know this is my go-to place in my home. Whenever I'm upset, happy, confused or anything I come here. It helps me relax." said Shreya

"So what emotion are you feeling now?" Asked Hemant out of curiosity

"Nothing specific. I like watching stars sleeping on this lawn. Just like this." Said Shreya and rested on the lawn and continued.

"It's a great feeling. Have you ever tried watching stars?"

"Me? No. Never." Replied Hemant.

"Now you can. I mean watch the stars." Said Shreya

Hemant quietly and with an awkward smile laid back on the floor. None of them spoke for a while. They just let the silence fill them. Hemant never felt this peaceful anytime before because he had never taken any time to just calmly sit with himself and do nothing. He realised how doing nothing as well could do a lot to your mood.

"I have never felt this peaceful anytime before. Sleeping like this is having the kind of effect on me that meditation has on people. I have never given any time to myself before. I have always indulged myself into too much work." Hemant said and looked at Shreya while she continued to watch the sky.

"And Shreya you were right about Pihu, it was affecting me a lot. Perhaps it still does. It's just that I have gotten used to carrying that feeling around." Said Hemant, still looking at Shreya.

"This is what you must not do. You are trying to relax yourself and still talk about things that are the reason you've lost your peace in the first place. Loosen up. Keep yourself above everybody else." Shreya said, looking at Hemant and smiling.

"I guess you're right. I've never had a person too close in my life and after years I'd found somebody and I thought keeping her forever was the perfect thing to do, but that's where I went wrong. I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have hurried." Said Hemant with a hint of realisation.

"You do not understand the meaning of being close to somebody." Said Shreya.

"So what do you think being close to someone means?" Asked Hemant with utmost attention.

"Now this moment. You are vulnerable, but you're not afraid of sharing things with me. You trust me, but you'll never call me as a

person that you're close to. I've seen you at your worst and at your best. Probably I know every shade of yours. I call this that we share as being close to someone." Said Shreya

Hemant was quiet. He was trying to process all that Shreya had just said. She was right about every single thing. He had always seeked her when he felt restless. He wasn't yet accepting it

"Guess I spoke more than I should have. Sorry about that" said Shreya.

"No you didn't and please don't be sorry" replied Hemant immediately. While Hemant was still in the process of finding the meaning to everything, Shreya was just happy that at that moment they were together. Hemant had started to grow on her. She was sure about one thing, she liked Hemant more than she liked anybody else at that point. Probably because of the qualities he had. The right kind of person could unveil the gem that he was. He probably wanted a person he could sit and talk to and discuss every bit of his mind because in years he had not done that.

Chapter 23 : Rishi’s feelings

Diwali break was over, it still felt like yesterday when Hemant, Shreya, Rishi and Priyam were celebrating at Shreya’s place. The lights, the diyas, the sweets, the firecrackers, everyone had fun that day to their uttermost capacities, but with the weekend gone everyone got back to their daily lives, which were about to get a lot harder. Hemant, Shreya and Rishi had discussed on their way back how the workload is going to increase on them when they start working on the new project. Shreya was particularly tense as she was relatively new to all this and still getting the hang of things, but Rishi had assured her that they are in this together. Whatever issues arrive, they will tackle it like a team. Rishi had worked with Manisha for 3 years, and it may have been that her leadership qualities brushed off on him.

While walking towards her cubicle, Shreys was expecting nothing but hell. You see there is always a learning curve when you are starting to work, the curve would have been relatively smaller if Shreya were to be in development since she had spent most of her college life coding, but that was not the case. She was working in operations and they don’t teach anything related to operations in the colleges, so even the most brilliant of minds find themselves a little out of their depth when starting. This was no different for Shreya, she was almost rueing herself for not taking that other job offer she had. The company was not as big, but at least she wouldn’t feel like a fish out of water there. All her worries were significantly boosted by the fact that her boss seemed to dislike her for some reason. No matter what she did, Rakesh would always find something to blame her for. Amidst all of this the only thing stopping her from having a nervous breakdown was the fact that she had people around her willing to help her and if not that she could always count on Hemant. Ironic right, Hemant the same guy who was making her life hell in her initial days.

She was relieved to hear that there were sessions in place for the entire team on monday and tuesday by experts before they start working on the new project, The sessions were great and Shreya was working harder than anyone to understand everything and prepare notes, but she was also finding it the hardest to get a grip of everything as she couldn't relate so some of the stuff, which was totally justified given her lack of experience.

The experts were done with one of the most important topics and before they moved any further they asked if anyone had any questions and there were a lot of questions. The experts were clarifying the queries one by one and it was Shreya's turn. She had a few basic doubts, even though her questions were basic, the experts were more than happy to answer, but as soon as they started a familiar voice cut them out asking them to skip the question, It was Rakesh. He didn't stop there either, he reprimanded Shreya in front of everyone and asked her not to ask silly questions and waste everyone's time. She was embarrassed in front of everyone again by Rakesh, she did not know how to react and her head shook in disbelief. Shreya didn't speak a single word through the entire session. When the session was over and they returned to their cubicles. Shreya was almost in tears and was trying her best not to let any out. Hemant observed this and couldn't help but feel sorry for her. He wanted to go there and console her, but he feared that his general lack of conversation skills might just make matters worse. Luckily for Shreya, Rishi arrived at the scene and tried to talk her out of it and promised her that he would explain to her everything that she had doubts on before they left.

It had been quite a day for Shreya. As soon as Rakesh left, Shreya immediately approached Rishi and asked him to help her with the issues she was stuck with. Rishi gladly agreed. Hemant who was leaving by then wanted to make sure Shreya was fine so he went to Rishi's place and talked to him. He gestured at Shreya asking if she was okay, she smiled. In response to it, Hemant let out a sigh, smiled back and left from there. Shreya felt good about his concern for her and started thinking of him. Rishi noticed Shreya

drifting off to her imaginary world. He shook her and her thought bubble burst and they got back to discussing the issues. After about an hour and a half, Shreya felt much more knowledgeable regarding the topics that were discussed earlier in the day. She thanked Rishi about a gazillion times for his help. Rishi was happier than ever that he could be of some help to her. They immediately packed up their stuff and left the office. On their way back home, Rishi wanted to do something for Shreya that would take all her stress away. He decided to stop by an ice cream shop to buy her an ice-cream. As soon they were half way through, Rishi stopped the vehicle and got down to get an ice cream. Shreya got into the flashback of how she was so reluctant about trusting Rishi the first time he had dropped her and they were in a similar situation and how now they were such good friends and she trusted him completely. In a span of 5 mins, Rishi was back with Shreya's favorite ice-cream.

"Here take this. Guess this can make your mood better." Rishi said.

"Awwww thank you so much. You really are a great friend." Said Shreya holding his hand. It was a random touch, but he felt special. They sat chatting and enjoying their ice-cream. It seemed like such a nice place to be for both of them. Shreya had great regards for Rishi, he was a guy that kind. On the other hand, Rishi had feelings for Shreya and therefore quite obviously he did everything that could make her feel better. His actions screamed his feelings for her, she was far from noticing it though because all she cared about was Hemant. He finally thought he would talk to her regarding this. Rishi being the kind of guy he was, didn't need anything planned out to tell Shreya how much he respected and liked her. Spontaneously he decided that when she would get down of the car near her house today, he would confess. They left the place and drove towards Shreya's apartment. Throughout the journey Rishi seemed quiet. While Rishi's mind was filled with the questions of what and how, Shreya noticed the change. She didn't bother Rishi by asking anything, but she knew there was something amiss. They reached

her place and when Shreya got down, she thought she better enquire as to what's wrong when Rishi called out to her.

"Shreya, I've been meaning to tell you something, since a long time." Said Rishi.

"Yeah Rishi tell me what is it?" Replied Shreya

"Shreya I am a very straight forward guy, I cannot beat around the bush or talk in riddles. Whatever I feel is what I say and what I'm going to tell you now is a very important thing for me and please don't be mad." Said Rishi

Shreya was now curious and confused both. She wondered what thing might there be that needed Rishi to give an explanation.

"Please Rishi I won't be mad, you can talk anything to me." Said Shreya being as calm as ever.

"Shreya I really like you. It's not something that has been for a few days, I've been feeling this for a long time and you mean a great deal to me. If only you could see yourself from my place, you'd know there has never been anything as special or as close as you are." Said Rishi, looking at her like she was all he had ever wanted. He wanted her to say yes. He wanted everything to be perfect. The unexpected turn of events had left Shreya stunned. More than being shocked, she felt sorry because she didn't even have a speck of that kind of a feeling for Rishi.

"Rishi. I am sorry, but I… I have never ever considered you anything other than a friend. Now that I know that you have feelings for me, we can’t do anything about it. I like Hemant. I am sorry I don't know why we have fallen into a situation like this, but I am really sorry." Said Shreya.

Rishi was at most prepared for her negative response, but this came as a total shock. He had no clue whatsoever about Shreya’s feelings for Hemant. He regretted his actions of confessing. He felt extremely upset that the girl he liked, liked somebody else. One could see the hurt in his eyes. He immediately apologized to Shreya and told her how he was unaware of the fact that she liked Hemant. Shreya was extremely courteous and apologized back for hurting

Rishi. He just smiled through it and wished her goodnight. Rishi then left for his home and so did Shreya.

Chapter 24 : Beginning of the end.

It was Wednesday and the new project had finally commenced. Rakesh had allotted everyone specific tasks and a window to complete it. Everyone was working like a maniac to complete them. Shreya was trying her best as well despite the incidents of yesterday. She was feeling guilty for shattering Rishi's heart after all Rishi was so nice to her. He would help her, talk her out of troubles, he was just the nicest guy and maybe she would have said yes, but she had now realised that she had feelings for Hemant, the kind of feeling that she had never had for anyone before in her life, but she was too scared to do anything about them as she knew about Hemant and Pihu. Yes she had had her moments with Hemant, but she never noticed anything in Hemant that would imply Hemant felt the same about her. Hemant who was sitting beside her did notice that something was off about her. On any other day she would always have a smile on her face, she would be cheerful, her eyes would be hopeful, curious and optimistic. Just taking a look at her would be good enough to make your day, but today she didn't feel like the Shreya Hemant knew.

Maybe the constant stick that she was getting from Rakesh was taking a toll on her. Hemant had noticed that she was being treated very unfairly by Rakesh. He scolded her in public, he had disapproved of her in front of everyone, but Hemant was not sure if this is why she was upset. Shreya was working when she ran into a problem she didn't know how to handle, so she asked Hemant for his help in a gloomy voice. Hemant started explaining to her while he was working on the problem. Rakesh was on one of his several walks where he would visit everyone and check if everything is working smoothly. When Rakesh saw Hemant helping Shreya, he asked Hemant to let her work on it alone and take care of his own work. Hemant argued that she does not know how to solve this issue, after all she was a rookie. Rakesh responded by saying if she doesn't know how to solve these issues she does not belong in this

team and left. With everything that was already going through Shreya's mind, this absolutely broke her heart and it showed in her eyes. She rushed to the washroom in tears, watching Shreya cry made Hemant absolutely lose it. It all made sense now. Hemant had heard rumours that Rakesh does not approve of working women and targets them unnecessarily, there had been past cases where female employees working under Rakesh had to resign or were fired for underperforming. He understood now why Rakesh was doing all this, and in a fit of rage he left for Rakesh's cabin.

"Rakesh, can I know why you are not letting me help Shreya?" Asked Hemant.

"Don't you have a lot of work to do on your own, and can I please suggest you to watch your tone?" Replied Rakesh.

"I am well aware of my tone and the workload on me and I can manage it, but please explain to me why you have been going so hard on Shreya. She is just a rookie, and she has been doing an amazing job at learning her roles and her job since she had joined"

"You are not the one to decide that, I am, and what are you trying to suggest anyway..?"

"You are well aware about what I am trying to suggest, you have a problem with her because she is a girl. I had heard rumours of how you have harassed female employees working under you out of their jobs and I didn't want to believe them, but now I have seen it first hand and I won't just sit and watch you repeat it with Shreya."

"Those are some pretty serious allegations Hemant, don't you think? What are you going to do about it anyway?"

"I am warning you, the next time I see you pull off a stunt like that, I will lodge a complaint against you with the Human Resources department and I want you to say sorry to her right now..!"

"Okay I will keep that in mind, but it's not possible for me to apologize to her now. She has just texted me that she has left the office and have taken a half day leave today. If you are done with these vile allegations on me you can leave now."

With this done Hemant left for his cubicle and when he reached he saw that Shreya and her bag were missing. Hemant wanted to

talk to Shreya, try to talk her out of her sorrows, give her a shoulder to cry on if that was what she wanted. Shreya had done this for Hemant once when they barely knew each other, it was his turn to return the favour, but she had already left for her place. Hemant thought that he would go to her apartment after office and check on her, but he decided that it would be better to give her some space for now and he would talk to her the next morning in the office. Hemant completed all the pending tasks assigned to him and left for his home. He felt like giving Shreya a call and telling her that Rakesh would not trouble her so much from tomorrow, but it was already 11 by the time he reached his place and so he thought he would tell her everything the next morning in the office.

Chapter 25 : Your services are no longer required.

Shreya had cried herself to sleep last night, she was trying very hard not to, but she just couldn't figure out what she had been doing wrong to deserve all this backlash from her manager. From day one she had tried to make the best possible impression on everyone in her office, but now, all she had managed to become was a laughing stock for some people and a person to feel sorry for for the others. The idea of quitting her job was constantly circling in her mind, but she was aware the impact quitting a job this early would have on her portfolio, also her parents were so proud as she had managed to get up on her feet so early in her life, she didn't want to let them down. They hadn't raised her to be someone who would bow down to adversities so easily, they had raised her to be a fighter, to be a strong girl, and keeping this in mind she wiped her tears, tied her hair, looked in the mirror and promised herself she was done being weak. She would take any bit of criticism thrown at her fair or unfair with grace and do her job to the best of her abilities. This day was supposed to be different, but she had no idea what this day had in store for her.

Hemant woke up feeling a lot better about himself than he had ever done before. He had done something for someone other than himself without any personal greed involved, perhaps for the first time in his life. He felt happy about the fact that from this day on Rakesh would be treating Shreya with all the respect that she deserves. He turned around on his bed to grab his phone still feeling a little drowsy. He started going through his messages and mails, and one particular mail burned all the sleep right out of his eyes, "your services are no longer required" it was a mail from the Human Resources department of his company. He sat down and opened the mail in disbelief.

“Dear Hemant,

We are sorry to inform you that as of 27th nov 2019 you will no longer be part of our organization. We have terminated your contract with the organization on the grounds of underperformance with immediate effect. You are entitled to your salary upto 10th dec 2019 as per company policy and a severance package as a part of your initial contract with us.

Please return any company property with you to the human resources department until the last day of your employment with us. Please keep in mind that you have signed a non-compete, non-solicitation and non-disclosure agreement. If you have any information about our customers, employees or other stakeholders stored on paper or on your personal devices, you must delete it immediately. Not doing so will entitle you to further legal action from our end. We wish you the best of luck.

Human Resources”

Hemant couldn’t believe what he had read. He was constantly rubbing his eyes so that he could see clearer, but to no avail. The words in that mail were still not changing, just when everything was getting back to normal for him and he was in a better phase than he had ever been in all his life, he was out of his job. He started thinking why it was always him, maybe he was misery’s favourite child after all, and stability outrightly hated him.

When Shreya reached the office the first thing on her mind was to apologize to Hemant for leaving so abruptly yesterday. After she had left all the load fell on him, but she couldn’t find him. She thought he was late and started working as usual. In a few minutes Rakesh arrived and asked the team if everyone had arrived, he had an important announcement to make.

"No, Hemant has not arrived yet..!” Rishi said.

“Actually the announcement is regarding Hemant itself. He won’t be coming to this office anymore. He was fired from the organization

last night for underperforming, and is no longer with us. Anyone underperforming from now on will follow suit and the rules are the same for everyone irrespective of their experience levels." Said Rakesh.

Saying this Rakesh left for his cabin leaving the whole team shell shocked to their cores, most of them were wondering what kind of performance levels are required because Hemant was fully committed to his work. He finished all the work assigned to him in time and was one of the top performers. This news was hard to process for the team, but it was the hardest for Shreya. By that point Shreya had developed feelings for Hemant and was waiting for the right moment to confess them. This sudden update dejected her, she couldn't concentrate on her work, she kept looking sideways to Hemant's desk and thinking how he won't be here again. There is one particular person whose presence lifts us up, irrespective of the crisis in front of us, for Shreya it was Heamant and with every passing day she was getting more and more used to having Hemant by her side. Just digesting the fact that he wouldn't be here anymore was eating her from the inside and she was struggling to cope.

It was the lunch break when Rishi showed up, and told Shreya that there was something that she should know.

"If it's not very important can we do this later? I'm not in the right mindframe after hearing about Hemant." Shreya replied.

"This is important, and you should know this."

"ok, go ahead"

"Hemant just might have some feelings for you."

"This is not the time for jokes Rishi."

"I am not joking, and he couldn't have been fired for underperformance. He was one of the best performers. He was fired because he confronted Rakesh for the way he was treating you yesterday and threatened him for action if he didn't stop. They had a big argument."

"How do you know all this?!"

"I was passing by Rakesh’s cabin when this was happening and I overheard them, and after hearing about Hemant, I checked with one of my friends from the Human Resources, he confirmed that Rakesh came there yesterday in the evening.”

Chapter 26 : Night of confessions

Shreya directly left for Hemant's house after the office. She was currently a host to maybe 10 different kinds of emotions. She was extremely outraged at Rakesh for doing what he did with Hemant, she felt terrible about the fact that Hemant was fired because he took a stand for her, she felt happy that Hemant cared and she was confused about what to do next. Throwing all these sentiments away, she went to meet Hemant keeping in mind that he was having a far worse day than he deserved. She feebly knocked on the door of his house and to her surprise Hemant opened it within the first 5 secs. She was elated to see him. One day without him and with a lot of drama seemed like a dreadful dream.

Though when he did open the door all the things that she wanted to say deserted her and she stood there still like a statue. Hemant broke the silence and asked her to come inside, and guided her to the couch in the hall. She sat there, still without words and Hemant asked her if she would like coffee, she didn't respond and Hemant said that he was going to make it anyway. He was back with freshly made coffee in his hands and he gently placed it on the table and took a seat beside Shreya.

He joked "man between the two of us it feels like you are the one who lost their job today"

This didn't go down very well with Shreya and she started staring at him with just a hint of anger in her eyes.

In that very moment Shreya just had one question in her mind, how? How is he still joking around, smiling and not vexed at all? This was not the Hemant she knew or she was expecting. Even though the question in her mind was how, her lips ended up asking why ?.

"Why.. what." Hemant replied.

"Why did you confront Rakesh about me, and risk your job?" asked Shreya.

“Why is that even a question, the way Rakesh was treating you, anyone would have done the same.” said Hemant calmly.

“But no one did right, why you” argued Shreya.

“I am not sure if I have the answer you want to hear,” said Hemant.

“I want to hear the truth,” Shreya shouted. Hemant took a pause and looked straight into Shreya’s eyes and said.

"Ever since we have spoken that night, all my mind thinks of is about what you said. You were right, I had been so lost in having permanency in my life that I forgot to check if it was right for me. Now I know one thing for sure, whether you choose to stay or not but you're the one for me. You are the one that I feel closest to, the one that knows my vulnerability to be my strength. Shreya, I do not know if my words mean anything to you, but I need you, I need you for myself. I know I do not deserve you, but I promise to love you with all my heart and be a better person. You have seen me change into someone better and that will not stop until you're happy. There's the truth. You feel happy now?"

Shreya was delighted to know that whatever rishi had told her about Hemant was true, her feet were not on the ground anymore, love was in the air and Shreya, well she was on the moon.

She couldn’t help the happiness on her face. She had always thought to herself that whenever she would share her feelings to a boy, she would do it in all seriousness, but she just couldn’t keep her smile in check this time.

“What are you smiling at?” asked Hemant.

Shreya smiled from one ear to the other at that instant and told him “who told you that you were smart enough to decide if you deserve me or not?”

“What do you mean?” asked Hemant.

“I mean that not once in my life have I crossed paths with someone who has deserved me more than you, you idiot.”

Shreya continued “this world might see you as someone self centered, rude, and 100 different adjectives, for all I care you are better than all of them. I have had this feeling about you for some time now, and you doing what you did for me only cements my belief. I don’t know when Hemant, but somewhere between you making my life hell and you going through hell for me, I lost my heart to you. And I want my heart to stay with you for a lifetime.”

There was still so much that Shreya wanted to say to Hemant but as soon as Shreya opened her mouth,

"Shush" Hemant said and put his finger on her lips.

She just stood there looking into his eyes as they convincing her of his love. Her heart was racing and her mind had absolutely given up on thinking. While he couldn't stop looking at her with all the love he had for her, she couldn't stop blushing. He held her by her waist and pulled her closer. She grabbed his shoulders and he got close enough for them to feel each other's breath. Shreya was all his and he knew that. He inched closer until their lips finally touched each other’s. They felt ecstatic as they were in their rightful place, that is in each other's arms. He felt her tender lips touch his and the wetness of it. It was as though they were lost in each other, when they heard a knock on the door. They were both startled at the sound of it, but after a moment or two they just looked at each other and giggled. Hemant looked at the clock, it was 11:30pm. It was awry that somebody showed up at his home that late. He quickly went and opened the door to find Manisha.

Hemant, Shreya and Manisha sat together on the sofa to discuss the course of events that had happened. Manisha had heard the news from a fellow friend who was previously under Manisha when she was the manager. She was shell shocked on learning the basis for his removal. She was furious because she knew it was all Rakesh's game. Manisha had come to his house with an intent that she would make Rakesh's life hell had he been involved in Hemant's removal. She was yet to know how low he could stoop.

Chapter 27 : The confrontation

It had been a gloomy day for Hemant, but accepting it as it comes wasn't Hemant's style. Manisha wanted to know everything about Hemant's removal. Though one of her friends had told her that he was underperforming and hence had been thrown out, Manisha knew there was something more to this than what she had heard and therefore she had gone to Hemant's flat. Based on the earlier conversation with Rishi, Shreya knew every detail of what had actually happened and she narrated the same to Manisha.

"Rishi told me everything that happened. Actually it had been a few days since Rakesh had been going really hard on me. Initially it was bearable and I thought I was unnecessarily stressing a lot over it, but with every passing day it only got worse. Hemant had been observing all that had been happening and one day while we were working together, Rakesh outdid himself and warned Hemant against helping me. Hemant didn't clearly take it easily and hence he confronted Rakesh and that's the reason he pulled off this stunt. If it hadn't been for Rishi, I would not have known anything. He also told me the names of the people who until today fully support Rakesh." Said Shreya, looking at Manisha. She then looked at Hemant with apologetic eyes.

"It's okay, it's not your fault." Assured Hemant.

"This time Rakesh has really crossed all the boundaries. If not stopped, I knew Rakesh was capable of doing such a thing. We need to stop this or we never know to what level he will stoop next." Said Manisha worriedly.

"I think I know what to do next, but I need someone from the office and it clearly can't be Shreya because I do not want any problems for her. She has already faced a lot." Said Hemant.

"I was the reason you got into this problem so I will be the one to make it right." Said Shreya confidently.

A lot of discussion followed thereafter, but at last Hemant and Shreya came to terms with a conclusion that Shreya would go to the Delivery Head and talk to him. After going through the plan for the umpteenth time, Manisha left to her house and Hemant dropped Shreya to her place.

Shreya woke up on time and got dressed. She had prepared her mind for the worst of the outcomes. Without wasting a lot of time, she left for the office and the usual routine followed. She attended her regular meeting with the team, finished all of the pending work and waited for the lunch hours to put their plan into action. The clock stuck 1 and everybody started making their way to the office cafeteria. She got up from her place, took a deep breath and started walking towards the Delivery head's cabin.

"May I come in, Prateek?" Asked Shreya.
"Can you please wait for 5 mins? I'm actually talking to Sumer from the HR department." Said Prateek.

It was a bingo, she knew the set of names that Rakesh had full support of and Sumer and Prateek were two of them. It seemed as though time wanted her to fight back for all those people whose lives Rakesh had played with. By now behaving nastily, firing people from their jobs and harassing women had become a daily todo for Rakesh, but it had to stop and somebody had to take charge. With all these thoughts, Shreya was ready to blow a punch on their faces.

After a fair 5 minutes she was called inside the cabin. Sumer who was ready to leave by then shook hands with Prateek and went to grab the door when he was stopped by Shreya.

"Sumer. I think this conversation should be important for you as well. Can you please stay back?" Said Shreya with a whole lot of confidence.
"If I may ask you your name Miss?" Asked Prateek with a bemused look.
"Shreya. I am Shreya, the newest recruit from Rakesh's team." Said Shreya.

"So what is the matter Miss Shreya?" Asked Prateek

"Well the matter is regarding Rakesh. He has fired a friend of mine, Hemant, for absolutely no reason and the most demeaning fact is that the reason given for his removal is underperformance. Each and every member of our team knows how hardworking Hemant is and how his involvement has been proven extremely crucial time and again. So what I want from you is that Rakesh must be fired from his job on the same terms as Hemant. So that is what is the matter." Said Shreya without a speck of fear on her face.

"And are we supposed to take orders from you Miss Shreya? I mean given that you are the newest recruit and we have both been here for 10+ years, shouldn't that be the other way around? And we know all about the firing of Hemant, Rakesh took our approval before taking the decision." Spoke Prateek adamantly and continued.

“Well then, did you at least do a performance review of Hemant since the reason is underperformance?” asked Shreya.

“Yes Miss Shreya, we can assure you that a thorough review was done” said Prateek.

Sumer smiled at the cheekiness of Prateek's reply, but what came as a shocker was Shreya who didn't even flinch at any of this. She knew it was not going to be easy, the best people in the business were her opponents and if she had to make them falter, she had to be the strongest.

“Well if you know about all the firings then you must know the pretences under which Manish was fired right?” Shreya said.

Now this blew the cheekiness right out of their faces, and at that moment they realized that Shreya was not playing around.

"Okay then, I will leave you to your thoughts. And just so you know, we will file a lawsuit for terminating the contracts of Manisha and Hemant under false pretences. The mail clearly says underperformance and so it is fully possible for us to do that. I just wonder how Manisha’s dismissal would look like in the lawsuit, but since you guys almost have a theme for treating female employees with such biases this can’t be the first time you would face this.. The

deal is very simple, Rakesh in return of Hemant's removal or the entire senior management will face the threat. You guys have until tomorrow morning to make a decision. Thank you for your time sir." Said Shreya and got out of the cabin with a smile because both of them were clearly intimidated and furious. Irrespective of what would happen, the initial trauma was clearly going to be Rakesh's and that was a win-win situation for Shreya and Hemant.

Once she hopped out of the cabin, she immediately informed Hemant and Manisha over a conference call about what had happened and how they had reacted. Hemant was a little miffed at their reaction and a lot worried about Shreya. Had it been for Hemant, he would have rushed immediately to meet Shreya, but it was not the rightest thing to do in the current situation hence he held back. After the office hours Shreya met Hemant and they discussed their next course of plan over a cup of coffee with Manisha at her house. Owing to the fact that Manisha had a cousin who was a lawyer, it made their work a lot simpler and now they had hands on information on what the procedure is and how they must go about it. After all sorts of important talks, Manisha handed over her wedding card to both Shreya and Hemant.

"You both must come. My fiance already thinks you guys are awesome. He would love to meet you." Said Manisha with a big smile on her face.

"Oh definitely. How can we miss your wedding?" Said Hemant with an equally warm smile.

Chapter 28 : The settlement

Life is so unpredictable, you come across something or someone when you least expect it. Shreya was that person for Hemant. The odds of them falling in love was the same as the odds of finding somebody on the internet to write a book with or finding a dress from your cupboard when you immediately need it. They had grown so fond of each other that it was undeniably transparent by the way they looked at each other.

Hemant drove from his place early in the morning to Shreya's apartment. On reaching there he dialled Shreya's number.

"Hello, yeah Hemant, tell me." Said Shreya on picking the call.

"What yaar, it has just been three days or so and you already sound so non-romantic." Said Hemant teasing Shreya.

"Mornings are not for romance, they are for work and from work I remembered I am running late for office. Is this what you called for?" Asked Shreya giggling over the phone.

"No. I called to tell you that I have come to pick you up for office." Replied Hemant.

"Awwww. I'm coming out in a moment."

Shreya had worn a yellow kurta with a white palazzo and a pair of jhumkas. She looked pretty, but a tad bit more from Hemant's perspective. He looked at her and just did that until she came close enough for him to smell and feel her. He hugged her. Shreya was taken by surprise because he had never behaved like this anytime before. She just stood there and looked at him like he was a freshly baked cake.

"You smell fresh." Hemant said, trying to get a little closer to her, but was stopped by Shreya who was in a hurry to reach the office because it was a big day. He noticed the restlessness in her demeanor and asked her to get into the vehicle.

"Don't worry Shreya, everything will be fine and even if it is not, we will find a way. You can leave that company and you're bright enough to get into any company you wish. All I want is you to be safe. Don't put yourself into any trouble and definitely not for me." Hemant said, looking at Shreya.

Hemant's concern was unavoidable, after a lot of bumpy rides he had found somebody that was as precious as his life. He couldn't just risk her safety for the sake of a job.

"It's not about the job Hemant. These people are rich and powerful, they will not be afraid of us. They will not even consider agreeing to us as an option. You know it very well. And Rakesh has been the root of all the problems for so many people working here. If all of us become so sensitive and afraid about his behaviour, there will be more people who will be fired on false context. Today there is nothing for us to regret about, it's just the loss of a job, but for some people this is everything." Shreya said with a hint of sadness in her voice, her eyes drooped. Hemant understood her worry. He looked at her, held her hand and gave a reassuring smile as though to tell her that things would be fine.

They reached the office. He dropped her at the gate and asked her to be careful and drove off. Shreya took a deep breath and walked towards the office. She went inside and though nobody talked about it in the open, people were aware of the incidents that were happening behind the doors. One or two of them looked at Shreya with hopeful eyes. Just then she met Rishi. He smiled at her and took her to the pantry. She knew he had something to say.

"You know there is a meeting going on right now. Rakesh is not a part of that meeting. I have a feeling your words fell heavy on them yesterday." Said Rishi with a cheerful voice.

"I'm not sure Rishi. There's always two sides to a coin. It could be anything. Frankly I feel hopeless right now." Said Shreya.

The meeting was over. Everybody seemed calm and composed like nothing ever happened. Shreya felt intimidated by it. There was no chaos, there were no further meetings. Rakesh seemed as happy as ever. All of this led to just one conclusion in Shreya's mind that there was a counter from their side that was so strong that she will possibly have to kneel before them.

All this while filing a lawsuit was just a pretence through which Shreya and Hemant wanted to dethrone Rakesh from his place, but now that seemed like the only option. And that's exactly what they did. All it took Shreya was a phone call, She called Manisha and Manisha called her cousin, and the lawsuit was knocking on the management's door by the evening. All this while Prateek and Sumer believed that Shreya was joking, but it had turned into a harsh reality now, and they calling Shreya into their office was the first thing they did.

“May I come in Prateek?” said Shreya.

“Funny how you still need my permission to come in right even after you did what you did. See, I am still the one with power over you and I will make sure you face the consequences” said Prateek with anguish and frustration.

Shreya realized that the pressure was starting to build on them from the senior management and as they had planned it was the right time for Shreya to play the final card.

"You know we have not gone public with the lawsuit yet. You can only imagine what it would be like for the reputation of the firm if we went public with a lawsuit like that. Media will bash you openly and they will dig out more dirt on the firm, you will certainly lose the financial backing from the investors and the trust with your customers. So all is not lost and we can still settle this, all the damage will be undone” saying this Shreya left.

The second thing that Prateek did was to call an emergency meeting of the senior management to discuss this issue and how they will tackle this. After some discussion they collectively agreed that they can’t take risk the reputation of the firm. If the lawsuit goes

public then there was a chance that they won’t be able to recover from it as customer and investors confidence in the firm is key for any business to be successful.

The third and final thing Prateek did was call Shreya and tell her that they had decided to settle and asked her to not go public with the lawsuit. Shreya’s happiness knew no bounds and she called Hemant instantly to come over as she had some news. Hemant was there in a matter of minutes and when she told him about everything, Hemant was so proud of her and hugged her like she meant the world to him. At that very moment he realized that Shreya was the best thing that had happened to him and promised himself that no matter what he was never going to let her go.

Next day at the official settlement they agreed to axe Rakesh immediately on grounds of mistreating female employees and deeming him to be a threat to a professional workplace environment. This was quite an achievement for Shreya, just imagine a newbie girl in the office making the management kneel before her. It was all down to her commitment and fearlessness. But Rakesh’s removal was not the only good news since there was no manager for the team, and finding someone capable on such short notice was impossible, Rishi was given the managers role on an interim basis and was promised a permanent role if he could do a good enough job. Everyone was so happy for Rishi as he completely deserved it and his good nature meant that the smiles will be returning to everyone's faces which went missing after Rakesh was appointed. Everyone in the team was confident that Rishi would do a very good job to make the team work cohesively.

Chapter 29 : The wedding dress.

It was 11 in the morning and Hemant was still sleeping without any worries, being jobless has its own merits. He had a good night sleep knowing that Shreya had won the settlement and Rakesh was no longer going to be in the organization. He could feel his phone ringing and vibrating, he picked it up still half asleep, it was Manisha.

“Hey Manisha.” Said Hemant in a drowsy voice.

“My god are you still sleeping? It's 11 in the morning” said Manisha.

“Why are you complaining, I don't have a job and you are not my manager anymore” joked Hemant.

“You don’t have a job so I thought you can help me with my wedding shopping and while we are at it we will also pick a few things for your job interview.” said Manisha.

“What interview are you talking about? I did not apply anywhere,” said Hemant.

“Well I did, I forwarded your resume to my boss and he liked what he saw so you have an interview and I Might just be your manager again” said Manisha with a smile.

“What, thank you so much Manisha.” said Hemant surprised.

“Well don’t thank me yet, if you don’t come down in 30mins I will tell my boss that he is not punctual. Come soon, I am waiting in my car.” said Manisha and cut the call.

Hemant rushed like a cat who had just seen a rat and got ready in no time. As soon as he got into Manisha’s car he started thanking her and said “thanks you so much Manisha, I am not sure how I will ever be able to repay you”. Manisha laughed and said that since he was helping her shop and carry the bags today the repayment part is already done, they smiled and left for a nearby cafe since Hemant hadn’t had breakfast.

While Hemant was enjoying the grilled cheese sandwich and omelette, Manisha started with her questions.

"So you and Shreya huh? When did that happen?" which Hemant replied sweetly

"I don't know when but it just did." Replied Hemant sweetly.

"That's yet another thing you should be thanking me for." Manisha told with a laughter.

"Yes. If it weren't for you, I probably wouldn't have even talked to her." Said Hemant.

They finished eating their breakfast and went to one of the few places that Manisha had shortlisted. It was a mall and this was only Hemant's second time going out shopping with a girl. The first time was with Pihu and he started to remember all the details bit by bit and was lost in it when Manisha broke the virtual bubble that he was in asking him to pick one of the two jewelleries that she had chosen. Thereafter Manisha helped Hemant pick a new pair of shoes and a formal shirt that would help him make an impression on his new bosses and for that, they visited almost 10 shops and checked about a thousand of them. Hemant was only wondering what it would be like when they would start picking a dress for Manisha.

And soon they did start picking a dress for her, it seemed as though Manisha was trying to find that one perfect dress that she had always imagined herself in. Wedding dresses are always special, they help you treasure a hundred memories with that person who you will wake up to for the rest of your life. After going through a dozen or two dresses they finally did agree on something, but the problem being that they weren't the same dress. Hemant tried his best to get Manisha to choose the one he had picked, but Manisha was dead set on the dress that she wanted and no argument from Hemant's side did anything to shake her. But he felt like trying one last time.

"Manisha, I am not an expert on wedding dresses, but this is by far the best dress we have seen all day, it is perfect." said Hemant, to which Manisha replied "yes it is the best, but the one I have is

perfect for me.” Hemant was baffled on hearing this and said this doesn’t make sense to which Manisha smiled and said "don’t worry it will make sense soon."

They quickly drove back to Manisha's house where all the preparations for the upcoming ceremonies were in full swing. A couple of aunties and kids had taken over the entire house while all the uncles sat out in the lawn and discussed politics and news. Manisha's mom was very busy meeting and greeting all the guests, serving them tea and showing them their rooms. The entire house was decked up with lights and flowers. There was a big rangoli put outside the house which was filled with all the colors. Passing through the crowd, Manisha greeted everybody with a namaste and where necessary touched their feet and introduced Hemant. Once inside she offered Hemant some hot coffee and they chatted for a while before Hemant left. It was such a wholesome feeling. Manisha's house looked one hundred percent like the house of the bride. Irrespective of how much you earn or what you achieve, when there is a wedding in an indian household, the entire family turns typical and Manisha's case was no different.

Hemant and Shreya made sure they attended all the ceremonies without fail and always stood by Manisha. It was as though over a few days they had grown to become the thickest of friends.

Chapter 30 : The wedding

Quite often we all forget that the wedding ceremony is more about the bride and the groom than the people around. This is the time when you must look into each other's eyes and mean every promise that you make while holding his/her hand to never let go of it again. It was Manisha's turn to do all of this.

It was the wedding day. Everything around was beautifully decorated with all sorts of flowers and colorful drapes and lamps. Nishant, Manisha's fiance, sat there counting stars and waiting for Manisha to come and join him. He could no longer wait in anticipation guessing what she would look like. Time and again Manisha had made him drool over her during the rest of the rituals by how great she looked. Everywhere there was just happiness. Both the families were extremely busy with all the preparations, yet the smile failed to fade away from their faces even for a second. Nishant's wait was finally over, he saw Manisha walk towards him. She had donned a red lehenga with a red blouse and ivory and sage green dupatta. Her lehenga had all sorts of intricate handwork and embroidery that it just looked like 'The dress' for her. She was decked up with a lot of gold jewellery, but the best ornament she had on was her smile and her sparkly eyes. She looked breathtakingly beautiful. She smiled from a distance at Nishant and he lost his heart to her all over again.

The entire venue was lit with various color lights. The cool breeze added to the ambience. People laughed at every corner and the vibe was extraneously gleeful. Manisha made her way and sat beside Nishant. It looked as though it was a straight out of a fairy tale scene. Nishant and Manisha had known each other for five years now, they dated for the last three years and now they were getting married. There were problems in their relationship, but then we all know what triumphed.

Hemant and Shreya were yet to arrive. Hemant had picked a sherwani that Shreya had chosen for him. The kurta was magenta in color and trousers, black. He looked absolutely handsome. Shreya had worn a magenta saree with her hair tied in a bun and embellished with roses. They had color coordinated their clothes and the idea was Shreya's. Hemant couldn't help but wonder how he had been able to get somebody as beautiful and understanding as Shreya. That entire day he was full of praises for Shreya.

They quickly made their way through the crowd and met Manisha and Nishant who were sitting and smiling at each other. The rituals were to begin in another 5 minutes.

While everything was falling into place for Hemant, there was a storm waiting to sweep the ground off his feet. Pihu had arrived at the wedding. She had always been a great friend of Manisha's ever since she had joined. They were almost like hangout buddies and Manisha had specially invited Pihu to her wedding. Pihu had by now realised that not all bonds can be broken and you can manage to live peacefully. She wanted to correct a few of her mistakes, specifically the one that had taken Hemant away from her. She waAll the guests had arrived and the entire ceremony was going perfect. Manisha and Nishant looked so much in love. It was the time for phera. Hemant and Shreya stood right behind them in case Manisha or somebody needed something. Shreya held on to his hand imagining them in Manisha and Nishant's place. Hemant whispered to her that they could get married immediately if she wanted, to which she blushed and punched him on his shoulder and he laughed. A moment had passed when he saw Pihu and everything came to a standstill. He knew facing her could be troublesome because, above everything they were the best of friends, but he did not know just how much it would disturb him. He looked straight at her. Everything else stopped making sense. There was Shreya who was his life and then there was this girl who he couldn't stop looking at. He tried yet his eyes remained on her, but there was no reaction on her face. It was totally pale.s ready to apologise and do anything that would make things right.

Pihu was aghast looking at Shreya and Hemant together at such close proximity. She had come with a hope to make everything like before and earn his man, but it felt like he wasn't hers anymore. She had her eyes stuck at them. It was as though all her dreams had suddenly turned into nightmares. The tear drop that she was holding on to with all the might dropped on her cheek. She felt so suffocated that she couldn't do or feel anything. It was only the beginning. She knew she couldn't wait and look at him like that because another second and she would collapse. With all the remaining strength, she turned her eyes away and that's when Hemant realised that he was all this while looking at her. The pain in Pihu's eyes was a symbol of her feelings for Hemant, but Hemant was struggling to understand what had just happened to him. The love of his life was right by his side then what was this void that he felt when he saw Pihu. He wanted answers to all the questions, but Pihu was gone. She wasn't there anymore. He excused himself and told Shreya he would be back in a minute. He ran outside the hall to find her, but she had mysteriously disappeared leaving behind Hemant and his questions.

Chapter 31 : You could’ve waited.

Pihu rushed straight to her hotel room cursing herself for not realizing what she was doing all this while. Maybe if she could have just answered those phone calls, if she was not busy all day in those meetings, if the pressure of a new job was not as much, if adapting to a new country was any easier, Hemant would’ve been holding her hand that night and not Shreya's. She realized that she did take him for granted, but she still loved him and so did Hemant according to Pihu. Pihu came to this wedding hoping for a future in which she could put her mistakes behind her, that her future still belonged with Hemant, but all those hopes had now shattered into pieces. Perhaps it was not her fault, those circumstances had really played a game with her. She was living her dream with her job, it's just that now she had no one to live them with. Crying on her bed she didn’t realize when she fell asleep.

All of Hemant’s efforts to find Pihu were in Vain, he looked for her in every corner of the venue, failed and eventually gave up, but just a glance at her and those tears that he promised himself he would never let out, fell. His night came to a standstill. Shreya noticed that Hemant had been gone for a while now and she found him sitting in a corner all by himself with his head down. She gently tapped on his shoulder.

“Hemant, are you ok, what happened?” asked Shreya.

“No nothing, just needed some fresh air to breathe, I am not very used to being in crowded places, let's go back” said Hemant.

“Are you sure, we can sit and relax if you want to”. Hemant got up, grabbed Shreya’s hand and with the sweetest smile that he could possibly pull off he said

“no let's get back, I don’t need to relax, I am fine as long as you are with me.”

By the time they returned the pheras were over and it was getting late. They thanked Manisha and Nishant for a wonderful night, wished them for a very successful marriage and bid goodbye. Hemant dropped Shreya to her apartment and left for his. It had been a very tiring day for him both physically and mentally. He fell asleep as soon as he hit his bed.

Next day Pihu woke up and there was only one thing she had on her mind, she was going to try and fix everything if possible. After all she was his first love and first love is always special. She knew facing him meant zero possibility of expressing herself and her feelings. So, she chose to write a letter.

Hi Hemant,

How are you? We haven't talked in a while, have we? I'm sorry I just disappeared last night. I should have talked to you or at least greeted you, but it was all too much for me to process. Perhaps it seems like it's a payback for all those times that I took you and the moments we shared for granted, but don't you remember anything about us? Our late night talks? Our first meet? Our first kiss? Just because you've found a second to all of this, it doesn't mean what we had is over, right? All of that means nothing to you? You remember when I was sick, you drove all the way till my apartment to just bring me food and tablets. Our last day together when you took me to so many places, that night when you held me in your arms as if you never wanted to let me go. I was your first love, I thought I would be irreplaceable. Last night when I saw somebody else hold your hand that should rightfully be in my hand, I was torn apart. All this while I was dwelling in the past and you have so conveniently moved on, isn't it? Don't you remember the night you proposed to me? You looked at me like there could be nothing more precious than I am. You told me how I was the only person you opened up to, I was the only one you could share anything with. How has that all changed so quickly? It took you years to find a person that you thought was worth being vulnerable to and just like that within months you have found a replacement of mine? You know the

reason I am here? It's not the wedding, it is not Manisha but it's you. I wanted to tell you how I had realised I was wrong. I wanted to tell you how you were the most perfect companion for me. Forget this, there is a question I need an answer to. If you think you love her, why were you looking at me like you couldn't wait to be with me? I know you came looking for me after I left and nobody told me this. It's just that I know you enough. Sometimes it seems like I know you more than you know yourself.

I know I failed you in the past. I know I shouldn't have run away from the most beautiful relationship that I had found for myself, but could you not wait? You knew me right? Then how did you not know that I would come around? But it is never too late. I know one thing for sure that I love you the most and I'm sure you do too.

When you read this letter I know you will recall each and every moment that we have shared. Please realise that you belong to me and not her. I'll be waiting for your reply.

Love, Pihu.

Chapter 32 : I Couldn’t

The next morning he woke up to that letter by Pihu and every word written on it took him to a guilt ridden trip. He felt like somehow everything that had happened was his fault and maybe it was. Everything happened so quickly between him and Shreya that he forgot to give Pihu the closure she deserved before moving into a new relationship. And this was his chance to do exactly that.

Hi Pihu,

I am fine and I hope you are as well. Yes, it’s been months since we last talked, and yeah I came looking for you last night and I did wait for sometime before I gave up. But don’t worry, I didn’t mind you running away like that, I understand it couldn’t have been easy for you. We were right in front of each other after all these months, but some things have changed since the last time. I do remember our firsts and believe me those are some of the best memories I have and will have for my life, I will cherish those because I had you in my life at the time when I didn’t have anyone. You were the one always sitting beside me, placing your hands on my shoulder and assuring me that everything will be better someday, you were the one I could call at any moment I felt like I need to talk to someone. You were always there for me and then one day you just weren’t there, why weren’t you? Yes I was smiling when you entered that gate at the airport, but in all honesty I needed you. I needed someone, anyone, I didn’t have a lot of people I could have turned to, and so I kept calling you again and again hoping you would pick up and then one day I lost all hope. I understand the circumstances were not in our favour, but only if you would have fought a little harder if I meant as much to you, because you meant the world to me and I did try.

I am really sorry, I have moved on. I had to, you know waiting for you was eating me up from the inside and I think it is the right time for you to move on as well, because even if I had a hint of those

feelings I had for you once, I still would not do anything that will hurt Shreya you know, because she was there when you were not, and the best part of all this is that I never asked her to be. She never knew what I was going through and still offered me her shoulder to cry on when no one did. You know I was fired under false pretences and she risked her job to make sure the people responsible for this suffer. You tell me, how can I even think of hurting her. When I am around her I feel like I mean something to someone and that is all i have ever wanted.

You want to know why I was looking at you right, I was looking at you because even if I have found someone else now, we had some unresolved issues and for a moment there I was lost. I was thinking how exactly did it come down to this, me holding someone else's hand with you right in front of me, and I kept looking for answers myself all night long after all I loved you and just for a moment there you loved me as well. But the truth, as harsh as it may be for you, is that it's all in the past, and it won't change. I love Shreya now, but any of this is not your fault. I know the circumstances were not easy on you, but then neither was it on me. Because even though you stopped being there for me, I still loved you, and I loved you the day after that, and the day after that. In all honesty, I loved you until I couldn't.

Yours Truly,
Hemant